

HOME CINEMA

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home cinema
speakers



Style solution
Monitor Audio
Radius system, p52

Ultra HD Group test

4K screen war!

Six cutting-edge 65in TVs – which is right for you?

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Sony HD projector
DALI lifestyle speakers
Pioneer flagship AVR
Sonos multiroom
Roku media player

Soundbars

Boost your TV's
audio power

RIDDICK IS BACK!

But does the sci-fi
sequel make for
a stellar Blu-ray
experience?

- THE WORLD'S END
- THE LONE RANGER
- ELYSIUM
- 2 GUNS
- ALPHA PAPA & MORE!



Xbox reborn!

Why there's more to the new
console than gaming...

25 Blu-rays for 2014

From *Thor 2* to *Transformers 4*,
BD blockbusters you must buy



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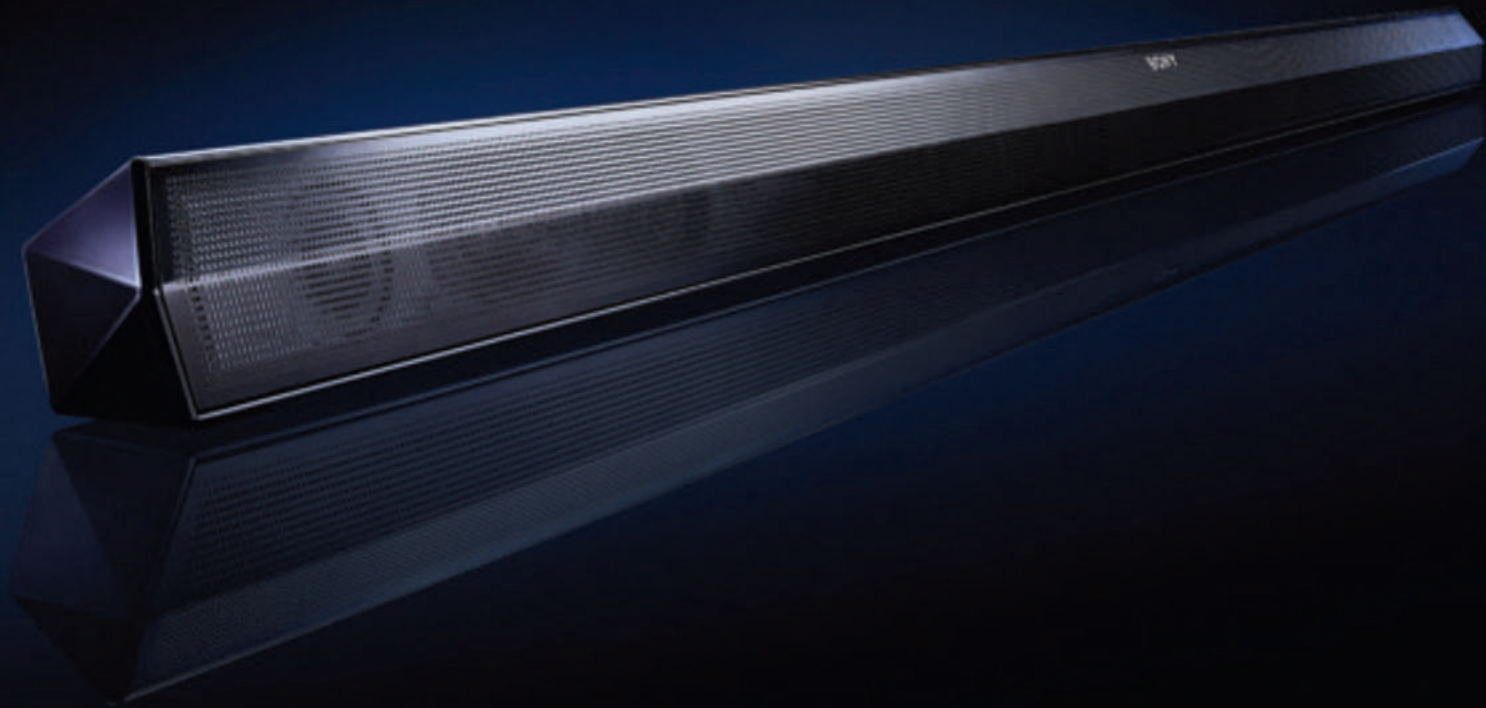
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HOME CINEMA

Choice

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WELCOME

This year, you can expect to see a greater push from the music industry towards high-resolution audio, as it tries to persuade you that your digital collection can offer an improved performance. I'm already convinced – the only thing stopping me replacing my MP3s (and CDs) with FLAC downloads is the lack of available content.

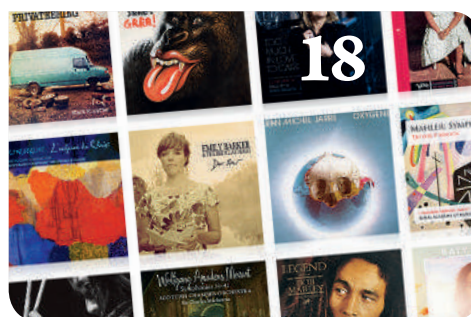


However, some parts of the CE sphere also want us to go digital with movies, and this where I will have to gratefully decline the invitation. **I'm not averse to moving from a Blu-ray disc shelf to an HDD movie server, but only if the quality is there.** And currently, film downloads just aren't up to scratch. The appeal of hi-res audio (see our feature on p18) is that it betters the current mainstream physical standard. There's nothing, in the video world, that can currently say the same. Digital for music, physical for movies – for me, that's the only way.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer

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OUR PROJECTION OF THE FUTURE



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e-shift3

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Coupled with a newly developed user-selectable Intelligent Lens Aperture that adjusts depending on the brightness levels from the video source. So whether the image is bright or dark our projector delivers with a vivid reality.

Now in its sixth generation, our D-ILA Projectors have always set new standards. In this latest evolution we have achieved an even narrower gap between pixels, making images more precise and rich with contrast.

But perhaps most importantly, no matter what source you choose to input, be it 4K, 3D or Full HD, JVC D-ILA Projectors will deliver images of advanced quality with extreme realism and presence in your home cinema environment. But after all seeing is believing, for more information please visit www.jvc.co.uk and for a product demonstration contact :

JVC +44 (0)20 8450 3282 email: hdworld@jvc.co.uk

* The 2014 range of JVC D-ILA Projectors consists of model numbers DLA-X900R, DLA-X700R, DLA-X500R. Visit www.jvc.co.uk for more details.

** Contrast ratio specifications are for the DLA-X900R.

BULLETIN

→ **News Highlights** **ATC** UK loudspeaker manufacturer introduces second-gen models
INDUSTRY TRUST Continuing the fight against film piracy **PANASONIC** Japanese tech giant partners with Studio Ghibli to create 12-bit Blu-rays **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-size chunks
MACHETE KILLS Grindhouse sequel slashes its way onto Blu-ray and DVD **AND MUCH MORE!**



Setting the bar

Pioneer SBX-N700 → www.pioneer.co.uk

Pioneer has made the leap into the soundbar market and is hoping to tempt serious AV fans with its top-of-the-range offering. Dubbed the SBX-N700, this Bluetooth-enabled £350 'bar' features Pioneer's Sound Retriever wizardry to improve the quality of streamed audio.



It also employs Miracast, which uses Wi-Fi Direct technology to mirror the content of a mobile device on your TV screen via the soundbar's HDMI output. Unlike the other two models in Pioneer's initial lineup, the SBX-N700 also comes with a separate wireless subwoofer



HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

Passive attack

ATC SCM40/SCM19 loudspeakers
→ www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk



ATC has expanded its SCM family of passive speakers with the addition of two new models – the £3,275 floorstanding SCM40 and £2,000 SCM19 (rear and right of the above image, respectively). Designed for use in 'small to medium-scale multichannel or stereo applications', both speakers feature ATC's soft-dome SH25-76 tweeter – joined by a 3in midrange and 6.5in short-coil bass driver in the SCM40, and a 6in mid/bass driver in the SCM19. The curved and laminated cabinets are available in real cherry and black ash finishes.



Streaming satellites



Elgato has launched a new addition to its network tuner box family, designed

to let you stream any free-to-air TV channel from a satellite connection to your phone or tablet. The EyeTV Netstream 4Sat retails for around £260 and operates on the new Sat>IP system, which has been designed to make more effective use of a satellite connection by allowing owners to beam TV content to up to four users, each of whom can watch and/or record completely different channels simultaneously. www.elgato.com

Stealthy speaker



Stealth Acoustics has added a new member to its family of StingRay all-weather

outdoor speakers. The two-way StingRay 6 is the line's most compact model yet, measuring just 15in wide, 7in tall and less than 4in in depth. The speaker couples a 6.5in cone woofer with a neodymium tweeter and claims a frequency response of 45Hz to 20kHz. Protection from the weather even stretches to the inclusion of a waterproof cable pigtail, and finishes include matte white, matte black, various stone flavours and custom wraps. www.stealthacoustics.com

Bedroom technology



Fancy treating yourself to a spot of AV luxury? Then check out the Azure, the latest addition to TV Bed

Ltd.'s family of deluxe bedroom gadgets. Priced around £1,500 (including delivery), the Azure TV bed features a 'whisper quiet' lift in the footboard carrying a 32in Samsung LED TV, plus a recessed compartment in the wooden spring base to hold your Blu-ray player, set-top box or games console. The Azure is made from faux leather and comes in three colours – black, white and chocolate brown. www.tvbed.com

Copyright theft grows old

But *Anchorman*'s Ron Burgundy and the Industry Trust have a plan...

According to research released by Samsung, roughly 15 million hours of TV on Christmas Day were watched through catch-up services in the UK. Meanwhile behavioural modelling specialist Sandtable claims that around 15 million more people will be set to stream or download films online by the end of 2015.

All of which shows just how rapidly our engagement with digital content has changed. However, this rapid take-up of digital film and TV among people of all ages is creating an even greater need for more copyright education, according to the Industry Trust for IP Awareness. Speaking at the organisation's Annual General Meeting in London, director general Liz Bales warned attendees that where older audiences just aren't up to speed about what's legal and what isn't.

'Just five years ago we used Knock-Off Nigel to stigmatise content-hungry, digitally-savvy young men', said Bales. 'Today, as Mum, Dad and even Grandma embrace new technologies, so the opportunities for them to access infringing content are growing exponentially.'

Moments worth paying for

As far as Phil Capp, chief executive of the Cinema Exhibitor's Association, is concerned, the solution lies in the entire industry working together. 'Working in a unique, collaborative way we can continue to deliver creative campaigns that not only reach the traditional younger infringer, but the



Mike Weatherly: 'Education will play an increasingly pivotal role in tackling copyright infringement'

host of new faces navigating online entertainment for the first time.'

Proof of this can be found in the success of the Industry Trust's most recent campaign. Launched in 2011, *Moments Worth Paying For* is produced in conjunction with the studios and uses film trailer imagery to cross-promote copyright awareness and the Trust's FindAnyFilm.com database. The campaign recently had its biggest viral success to date with a special *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* trailer featuring all-new material by funnyman Will Ferrell.

This approach, and the continuing success of FindAnyFilm.com (which recently added Yahoo Movies and the PlayStation Store to its extensive list of partners) was praised by Mike Weatherly, MP.

'Making it easy for consumers to find and enjoy legal content online must be a vital part of this and the audio-visual industry really seems to be leading the way in this regard.'

The Trust also used the meeting to announce a new IP education programme with Film Nation UK.

As part of a sustained drive to engage two million young people by 2017, *Creating Movie Magic* aims to give junior Scorseses first-hand filmmaking experiences to encourage respect for creativity.



Anchorman's Ron Burgundy helps you 'FindAnyFilm'

PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag (PS3/PS4/Xbox One/Xbox 360/PC)

While we don't approve of videogame piracy, Ubisoft's open world pirate-themed smash is an absolute joy.

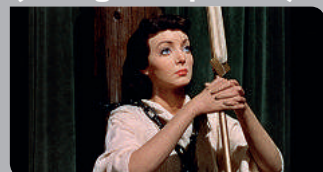


Man of Steel (All-region BD)



This reboot delivers a super-powered sonic assault – particularly the Smallville showdown between Supes and his Kryptonian foes.

House of Wax 3D (All-region Import BD)



This 1953 horror classic looks spectacular on 3D Blu-ray and is accompanied by some fascinating bonus features.

Skyfall (All-region BD)



Our favourite disc of 2013 delivers an unrivalled AV experience – and the film is a cracker as well.

Pacific Rim 3D (All-region BD)



Guillermo del Toro's latest Blu-ray blockbuster is an SFX marvel and a potent test of your HD display. Don your spex and dim the lights...

LOADING...

Team HCC's pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

Fangs for the memories



Universal Pictures is gearing up to unleash the first season of the hit TV reinterpretation of *Dracula* on your cinema setup on February 10. Starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers as the titular blood-sucker, *Dracula: The Complete First Season* is being released on Blu-ray and DVD, both offering all ten episodes of the show, plus featurettes, deleted scenes and the original US cut of the third episode.

Tom Hanks takes on Blu-ray pirates



Sony Pictures will release the Somali pirate thriller *Captain Phillips* on Blu-ray and DVD on February 10.

Extras on the hi-def version will include a director's commentary and three *Making of...* featurettes.

Here be dragons!



Winter is coming sooner than expected following HBO Home Entertainment's announcement that it has brought forward the UK BD and DVD release of *Game of Thrones: The Complete Third Season* to February 17. Pick up the next issue of HCC for our verdict...

Boosting 1080p performance

Panasonic partners with Studio Ghibli to deliver 12-bit Blu-rays in Japan

Panasonic has partnered with legendary Japanese animation house Studio Ghibli to promote a new generation of 12-bit Blu-ray discs. The system, which requires both 12-bit encoding and a compatible 12-bit decoder in the Blu-ray player, significantly enhances 1080p image quality.

During an exclusive briefing with HCC at Panasonic's Osaka Kadoma facility, chief engineer Kazuhiko Kouno explained that the development represented a significant enhancement for Blu-ray, although conceded that the tweak was actually outside the BDA specification for the format.

Master Grade Video Coding has been designed to retain the full 10- to 12-bit clarity of studio master recordings. Currently, the standard Blu-ray specification supports only 8-bit depth. While HDMI can support 12-bit via Deep Color, and most mid-premium TV panels are capable of 10- to 12-bit playback, there has been no commercial material available.

Getting animated

The 8-bit depth restriction of conventional disc mastering has a very visible impact on gradation.



Kazuhiko Kouno: 'The restrictions of 8-bit Blu-ray are noticeable on anime where colours can exhibit obvious banding'

Natively a disc will only offer 256 steps. By way of contrast, the 12-bit studio master is capable of 4,096.

'This is particularly noticeable on anime where colours can exhibit obvious banding,' explains Kouno-san. 'With 12-bit processing, the gradations vanish.' While live action movies do not exhibit similar banding effects, the additional refinement offered by 12-bit processing adds depth to a scene; clouds of gunfire smoke that appear less-than-fluid in 8-bit gain subtle depth and believability when seen in 12-bit original resolution.

To achieve the greater bit depth, additional data is encoded separately to the standard 8-bit data. The two packets are then processed together for output over HDMI. The technique is similar to that which enables 3D Blu-rays to be backwards compatible with 2D decks.

To date, 14 12-bit titles have been released in Japan, including *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Of course, users also need a 12-bit capable Blu-ray player to see the

improvements. To date, Panasonic has firmware enabled six of its fleet to be compatible, but these are only available in the Japanese market.

Of course, one might wonder why Panasonic has pioneered unilateral improvements to the 1080p BD standard when a 4K iteration is in development? Assistant general manager Tetsuya Itani confided that, in his opinion, 4K UHD Blu-ray was probably 'years away' from reality. 'The situation behind the scenes is chaos,' he told HCC.



My Neighbour Totoro is among the 12-bit BDs available in Japan

Making the best even better

Oppo's award-winning Blu-ray player gets an AV overhaul

Since 2011 UK-based AV modification specialist Audiocom International has made a name for itself developing a range of custom 3D Blu-ray players based on the Oppo brand. The latest is the £2,050 Oppo-BDP-103D Audiocom Signature Edition.

Based on the HCC award-winning Oppo BDP-103D, Audiocom's updated deck features multizone Blu-ray playback, multiregion DVD playback and a host of video, audio and HDMI upgrades. Among the latter are the deployment of a massive toroidal transformer providing independent power supplies for video and analogue circuitry, new discrete Schottky diodes for main board power supplies, an

improved chassis, new Quantum AC power purification and the promise of 'vastly improved, error- and jitter-free data processing' courtesy of a 140 Femtosecond clock for the main processor.

The icing on the cake is that the modifications are done with the approval and support of Oppo BD UK, meaning that the player also comes with a two-year Oppo-approved warranty.



Audiocom's AV upgrades are approved and supported by Oppo UK

MIRROR TV's

Frameless or choice of decorative frames



As seen on 60 minute makeover

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40" 3D LED Smart TV inc. Frame	£3,299	£1,599
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815mm x 375mm Art Speakers (pair)	£1,299	£899
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Our flat panel art speakers are available in a range of sizes and designs. Their decorative appearance will complement the décor of any room, filling the space with crystal clear non directional sound.

HD FRONT PROJECTION SYSTEM

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100" 16:9 Framed Screen & Projector	£5,499	£3,499
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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ JANUARY

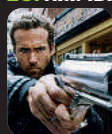
13: The Tunnel

Stephen Dillane and Clémence Poésy star in this English-language remake of hit Scandinavian noir series *The Bridge*. Find out if it lives up to the original as it hits DVD and Blu-ray. www.acornmediauk.com

17: The Wolf of Wall Street

Martin Scorsese is reunited with Leonardo DiCaprio for this black comedy based on New York stockbroker Jordan Belfort's memoirs. You can track this Wolf down at UK cinemas from today. www.universalpictures.co.uk

20: R.I.P.D. 3D



The supernatural's answer to the *Men in Black* hit Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray and DVD in the UK. Two alternate scenes are among the

extras that Blu-ray buyers can look forward to. www.universalpictures.co.uk

27: Rush

Ron Howard's biographical drama about Formula One legends James Hunt and Niki Lauda arrives on DVD and Blu-ray. Fans should race down to Sainsbury's to get hold of an exclusive Blu-ray release boasting a bonus disc loaded with interviews and six *Making of...* featurettes. www.studiocanal.co.uk

→ FEBRUARY

03: Bates Motel: Season One



Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* gets a modern-day reboot with this hit series following the formative years of a young Norman Bates and his 'unusual' relationship with his mother. If you missed it on TV, catch it on DVD and BD from today. www.universalpictures.co.uk

04: ISE 2014

The RAI in Amsterdam opens its doors once again for this annual three-day trade show for the professional AV and electronic systems industry. And *HCC's* roving reporters will be there to bring you all of the biggest stories. www.iseurope.org

06: HCC #231

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

Sounding off about 5.1 sound

Will the success of soundbars spell the end for multichannel systems?

Soundbars have been one of the few AV market sectors to show considerable growth over the past couple of years. But does the mainstream adoption of single-speaker convenience mean that customers are turning a deaf ear to dedicated multichannel sound systems? In an attempt to find out, *HCC* cornered the representatives of some of the UK's biggest custom install suppliers to get their thoughts on the state of the industry.

'I think home cinemas are more desirable now than ever before,' insists Kris Hogg, Vice Chair of industry body CEDIA. 'And our biggest opportunity is coming with the introduction of 4K Ultra HD. Enquiries have risen dramatically.'

Hogg also states that sales of server products like Kaleidescape are growing and that, while soundbars have grown at the expense of inexpensive all-in-one 5.1 packages, enthusiast-grade installs are just getting bigger. 'The dedicated residential cinema now has a 7.1-channel sound system installed as a minimum,' he told *HCC*. 'The phrase 5.1 still gets used, but it's become shorthand for multichannel rather than a definition of the actual setup.'

Mark Taylor, from AV specialist Invision UK, agrees that 4K UHD is certain to boost interest in 'quality home cinema' and claims that 'the explosion of soundbars' is nothing to be concerned about as it's 'largely due to the reduction in quality of TV speakers as the manufacturers keep striving to make the thinnest TV possible...'

And while Yamaha may have been an original pioneer in the soundbar business, the company is also keen to stress that it hasn't lost faith in full-blown AV. 'Home cinema and receivers remain our bread and butter,' admits brand specialist Chris Wray. 'Surround sound is still where the true home theatre lies. People really do want high-quality audio not just in two-channel but in surround as well.'

Fighting back

Rather than multichannel systems, Onkyo Product Development consultant Kulwinder Singh Rai sees soundbars having a far greater impact on another part of the speaker market altogether. 'Bluetooth-enabled soundbars are starting to encroach on the wireless smartphone dock market. They are, after all, essentially multichannel versions of the same products.'

Indeed, as far as industry veteran Ian Severs, from Karma AV, is



Timmi Thorsen: 'Architectural speakers have given genuine discrete multichannel sound a way to fight back'

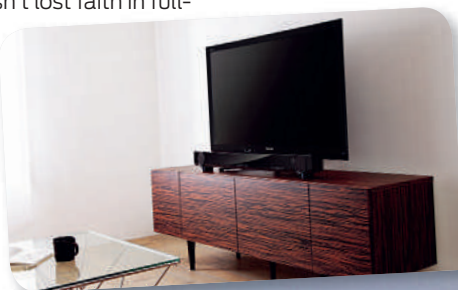
concerned, there will always be a demand for high-end home theatre setups. 'The benefits are well understood and in our experience there are customers prepared to pay a premium price for the likes of a JBL Synthesis system,' he told us.

However Severs also acknowledges that not everybody has either the space or the budget to accommodate them, saying, 'sometimes installers just have to get creative.' One possible solution to achieving surround sound in more confined spaces is the Cornered Audio range of triangular speakers, which fit snugly into room corners.

Indeed, Timmi Thorsen, from AV specialist Habitech, believes there's still plenty of wow factor left in in-wall and in-ceiling speakers. 'Architectural loudspeakers, like those from Sonance, have given genuine discrete multichannel sound a way to fight back against the convenience of the soundbar. It really boils down to cost. If you want a high-quality home cinema experience in an existing space or a dedicated room, you have to pay a little more.'

Paul Mott, Sales Director at custom install distributor AWE Europe says the biggest trend in home cinema has been the move away from projection to 65in screens and larger, as well as a growth in content streaming.

'I actually think the huge growth in soundbar sales indicates that people really do care about the quality of audio at home – and that's no bad thing.' There's a place for everything, he adds. 'A soundbar can be the ideal big audio solution for rooms where a full 5.1 speaker setup is just too difficult to place, and maybe a little overkill.'



Ultra HD is boosting interest in dedicated cinemas

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Samsung gets innovative
Samsung Electronics has opened its new European Innovation Centre in London's financial and business district. Studying consumer and business behaviour, the centre promises to 'identify innovation projects that will enhance the lives of people through improved technology'. Secretary of State for Culture Maria Miller attended the opening and claimed that it 'highlights our global reputation as a hub for the world's creative economy... and will help drive growth and jobs'.

2 Arcam trade-in
Arcam has launched a pretty sweet UK-only trade-in deal for its £1,000 BDP300 Blu-ray player. Until the end of January you can save £500 by trading in any Arcam disc player against the BDP300 at any authorised Arcam dealer, or save £400 by trading in any other type of disc player ('even that £29 Argos DVD player' as the company helpfully points out). Visit www.arcam.co.uk for more info.

3 Sainsburys goes digital
Supermarket giant Sainsburys has revealed that it will be stopping the sales of all physical media through its website by the end of February. While Blu-rays, DVDs, CDs, video games and books will still be available in stores, the Sainsburys Entertainment website will focus solely on streaming and downloadable content.

4 LG welcomes AllJoyn
LG has revealed that it will be incorporating AllJoyn technology into its future Smart TVs. Developed by Qualcomm, AllJoyn enables seamless cross-platform device interoperability – meaning that you could have Android, iOS and Windows smartphones communicating simultaneously with an AllJoyn-ready Smart TV.

5 Drone delivery
Amazon is testing unmanned drones as a way of delivering goods to customers. The online retailer claims that its 'Octocopters' could one day deliver packages weighing up to 2.3kg within half-an-hour of an order being placed.

6 Virgin app lands on Android
Virgin Media has launched an Android app for its Virgin TV Anywhere service. Boasting more live channels than Sky Go (with 90 available online and 67 to watch on mobiles and tablets), the service is also the first to offer the full range of UKTV channels with the recent addition of Alibi, Dave, Drama, Good Food, Home, Really, Watch, Yesterday and CBS Reality. The app is available free to all Virgin Media TiVo customers.

7 Yahoo finds any film legally
Yahoo Movies is the latest online service to join forces with FindAnyFilm.com, the UK database designed to let film fans search for titles across cinema listings, Blu-ray, DVD, UltraViolet, On Demand and streaming services. The partnership will see 'book now' and 'watch now' buttons appear on news articles and review pages across the Yahoo Movies site, allowing film fans to easily connect with legitimate content suppliers.

8 Smart TVs to stop spying
LG Electronics has vowed to stop spying on users of its Smart TVs after it was revealed that the connected screens track the viewing habits of all users, even when they have turned off the function in the setup menus. The manufacturer is keen to stress that 'no personal data was ever collected' and is issuing a firmware update to solve the problem.

9 Sky+ app gets upgrade
Sky has launched an update for its popular Sky+ app allowing users to download On Demand content to their Sky+ HD box at home from anywhere in the world. Available content includes selected shows from Sky's Showcase, Catch Up TV, Movies and TV Box Set services.

10 Holy Bat-collectibles!
Here's the ultimate collectible for any superhero fan. US catalogue retailer Hammacher Schlemmer is offering a licenced, road-legal replica of the Batmobile from the '60s TV series. Built around a custom Lincoln chassis, each replica takes around a year to make and will set you back \$200,000!



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Waiting for Godot

Fast & Furious actress Gal Godot has been cast as Wonder Woman in Zack Snyder's *Batman vs Superman*, with the director describing her as having 'that magical quality that makes her perfect for the role.'

Apocalypse soon



We may still be a few months away from the cinema release of *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, but that hasn't stopped Bryan Singer from confirming that another sequel is in the works. The director revealed that *X-Men: Apocalypse* will hit cinemas on May 27, 2016.

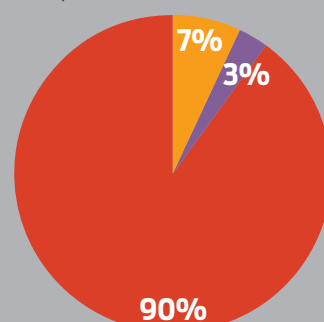
Neverland to Narnia

Finding Neverland and *Life of Pi* screenwriter David Magee has been tapped to write the script for *The Silver Chair*, the fourth *Chronicles of Narnia* film. 'I have always loved *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and I endlessly imagined myself finding my own passage to Narnia someday', gushed the writer after landing the gig.

WE ASKED...

Do you use a soundbar or soundbase anywhere in your home?

- Yes, as part of my main setup
- Only on a secondary TV
- No, I don't use one



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Dressed to kill

Machete Kills → Lionsgate → Region B BD/R2 DVD



Ex-Federale agent Machete finds himself up to his neck in trouble yet again when Robert Rodriguez's grindhouse-inspired action sequel *Machete Kills* arrive on Blu-ray and DVD on February 17. Joining the madness this time around are Charlie Sheen, Amber Heard, Mel Gibson, Lady Gaga, Sofia Vergara, Michelle Rodriguez and former 'Spy Kid' Alexa Vega (pictured). Cast and crew interviews and a *Six Degrees of Robert Rodriguez* featurette are among the extras promised on both discs.



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High-res audio targets 2014 take off

As video rushes to a 4K future, sound is determined not to be left behind. **Steve May** listens to the growing hubbub behind high-resolution audio and considers binning his MP3 collection

IT'S NOT JUST video that is getting a resolution update. Audio has also jumped the bandwagon and is now promising an altogether sharper sonic experience. The High-Resolution Audio banner is being unfurled by a growing number of big-name brands, eager to push performance beyond the limitations of the now venerable compact disc.

Of course, audiophiles have been experimenting with high-resolution music files for years now, embracing esoteric codecs such as WASAPI and ASIO. For those with little taste for such convoluted technology, this was one revolution looking unlikely to spin faster than 33.3rpm. Then 4K happened, and the hype driving Ultra HD video miraculously began to provide a new impetus to popularise superior sound.

Sony has been quick to take the lead, fashioning funky new branding for its high-performance hardware and galvanizing software industries for support. Now its rivals have immediately begun road-mapping audio development alongside 4K product plans.

Sound made a bit better

Unlike the last attempt to improve audio technology, which involved Super Audio CD and DVD Audio, this resurgence is not so much a format war, more an ill-defined disagreement.

John Anderson heads up Sony Europe's AV divisions. He told *HCC* that high-resolution audio

'works on a number of levels' but is not only about competing codecs and different bitrates. By way of a benchmark, Sony classifies hardware as high-resolution only if it supports a frequency response up to 40kHz. 'If a product doesn't make that level we won't classify it as high-res and we won't use the badge,' he reveals. 'Internally, we're very strict.'

David Chesky, CEO of HD Tracks, the US high-resolution audio store, offers a software definition for high-resolution audio: 'I would describe high-res audio as simply better than 16-bit/44.1kHz CD – it's 24-bit/48kHz and onwards, up to the roof,' he confided.

But given that humans can't hear beyond 20kHz, is there really any reason to get excited? Chesky says

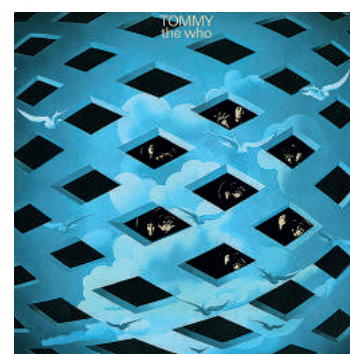
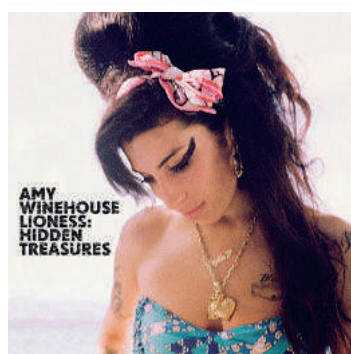
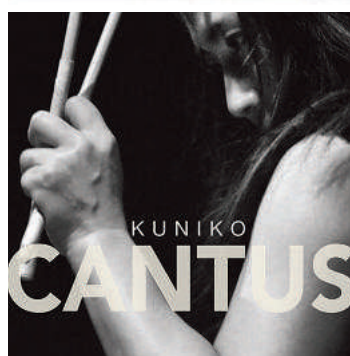
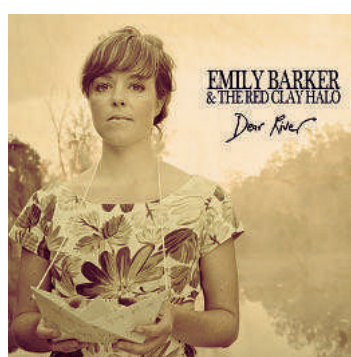
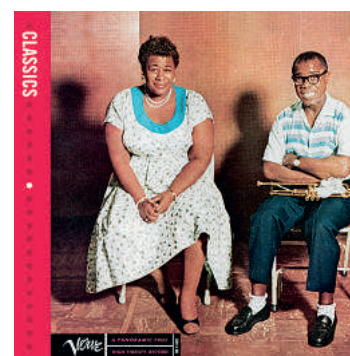
'The industry push towards hi-res means your ears could finally be treated to the musical upgrade they deserve'

the appeal of high-res sonics is not simply a numbers game, it's about utilising the extra bandwidth to move unwanted artefacts out of the audible spectrum. 'It's all about the Nyquist Theorem,' he explains. This mandates the relationship between frequency response and bandwidth; to accurately reproduce 20Hz to 20,000Hz (the human hearing range), you need a sampling rate (the number of times per second that the analogue signal is digitised) twice as high, which is why the CD standard was set at 44.1kHz. 'But then brick-wall filters in the audio band can cause pre- and post-ringing before the music even starts,' he notes. 'It totally ruins it. The thing about high-res audio is that we can get these filters way out of the audible band, so you don't have these problems. Music sounds more organic.'

'When you hear a cello live, your ear knows it's live,' continues Chesky. 'Why? Because there are no artificial artefacts!' You can tell it's live even when

The HDD-based HAP-Z1ES sports Sony's new 'High-Res Audio' branding





you don't hear it direct, he stresses. 'The eye is fooled at 24fps, but we need really great signal processing to recreate the sound of that cello. A CD or MP3 won't represent the same harmonic and tone.'

So where does the quest for better-than-CD sound actually lead us? Well, in most cases it'll be to studio master-grade recordings captured at 24-bit, encoded in FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) or ALAC. Such files offer greater detail and clarity than regular MP3 and AAC, and occupy around half the space of a WAV or AIFF file. They'll also play on most audiophile-facing hardware.

However, also creating quite a buzz for itself at the moment is DSD. Originally developed for Super Audio CD, DSD is a premium alternative but can prove a challenge to use. DSD downloads can't be conveniently streamed across a network from a NAS and typically require a PC or laptop to be connected directly to the playback electronics. Also known as DSD64, the standard uses a 1-bit/2.8224MHz sampling process able to achieve 120dB within the 20Hz-20kHz band, thanks to clever noise shaping. There's also a variation on the format, known as DSD128, which increases resolution by doubling the >

Fans of most genres – from classical and jazz to rock and modern pop – should be able to find hi-res music to suit their tastes, but there's plenty of content still waiting to be made available

FINDING THE FILES

There's music out there – if you know where to find it

Linn Records (Studio Masters)

This pioneering UK indie offers a wide variety of music from rock and folk to classical and jazz in Studio Master FLAC and ALAC grades. While there's plenty of obscure treats to riffle through, there's also some better-known artists available at better-than-CD resolution, including Rush, Katy Perry, Kiss, Rod Stewart and The Rolling Stones.

www.linnrecords.com

Naim Label



Treading similar ground to Linn is Naim. The brand's record label offers downloads in FLAC and ALAC, and uses the term 'Hi-Def' to describe its 24-bit releases. Once again, there's an excellent spread of genres available, but few names you'll hear in common conversation.

www.naimlabel.com

2L



The very definition of eclectic, multi-award-winning 2L offers an extraordinary

collection of Norwegian composers and performers. Its high-resolution recordings are available on physical media (CD, SACD and Pure Audio Blu-ray) as well as FLAC downloads in 24-bit/96- or 192kHz.

www.2l.no

Gimell

This classical label, best known for its recordings of a *cappella* choral group The Tallis Scholars, offers high-res audio in both stereo and surround formats. The former are 24-bit studio recordings varied between 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 176.4kHz and 192kHz while its multichannel releases are available at 44kHz, 49kHz, 88kHz and 98kHz.

www.gimell.com



sampling rate, albeit creating file sizes commensurately larger. Swedish label Opus3 is one specialist outfit to offer such downloads. There's even a professional DSD editing iteration, known as Digital eXtreme Definition, but really pursuing this for common usage is little more than a sign of madness.

Ultimately, for many users intent on building streaming-based entertainment systems, such complexity significantly reduces the appeal of DSD. For most, focusing on high-resolution FLAC probably makes the most sense.

High-resolution hardware

While only Sony has gone so far as to create an eye-catching badge for its hardware, there's no real shortage of kit able to play high-resolution audio. Many media players unspool the files, although some are limited to sample rates of up to 96kHz (one reason some high-res downloads are available in both 96kHz and 192kHz versions), and even fewer have audiophile pretensions.

A growing number of AV receivers will playback high-res audio across a network and from a USB device. Alternatively, you can opt for a standalone network player, such as the £400 Pioneer N-50. Conversely, Sony's £2,000 HAP-ZIES hard drive player utilises a 1TB drive and prefers to sync its contents with a networked PC rather than stream. Sony also offers the matching TA-AIES integrated stereo amp, again priced at £2,000. But high-res audio isn't just about big ticket items, as the £800 HAP-S1 all-in-one 500GB music system demonstrates. 'The whole object of this is to expand high-res audio out into accessible price points,' says Sony's John Anderson. 'It's the only way to get more people willing to invest in the concept.'

When it comes to high-calibre streaming, Linn Products routinely sets the pace. The Scottish brand recently released the mind-bogglingly sophisticated £50,000 Klimax Exakt digital active speaker system, exalted as the purest delivery of studio master files available, and has been flying the high-quality download flag since its first Linn DS streamer was launched in 2007. Managing director Gilad Tiefenbrun told *HCC*: 'Our philosophy is source first, to ensure absolute accuracy of recorded data.' Linn's Klimax DS was the first audio system able to play back 24-bit native files in the home. 'The majority of files now being downloaded from the Linn Records

Linn's Kiko system caters for hi-res files including FLAC and ALAC (up to 24-bit/192kHz) streamed over a network

store are high-resolution studio master quality,' reveals Tiefenbrun.

One left field addition to the high-resolution audio revolution are Blu-ray Pure Audio (aka High Fidelity Pure Audio) discs. Championed by Universal Music, these new platters play on a standard Blu-ray deck but contain only 24-bit audio, up to 192kHz, in compression-free PCM, Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio guises. Conceptually similar to the ill-fated DVD-Audio format, it remains to be seen if this new variant gains traction. At least its compatibility with BD makes it an easy system to trial – and it doesn't require any additional hardware outlay for cash-strapped cinephiles.

There remain a fair few hurdles before high-res audio finds the audience that Sony and other advocates crave, not least the lack of content from the major record labels. All those extra bits are all well and dandy, but if you can't hum the tunes it's going to be a difficult sell. Still, as with 4K, the omens are beginning to look good. Your ears could finally be in for the musical upgrade they've long deserved ■



Sony Europe's AV maestro John Anderson admits hi-res audio is difficult to classify...

...yet HD Tracks' CEO David Chesky says it's anything beyond 16-bit/44.1kHz CD



Linn's MD Gilad Tiefenbrun reveals that Studio Master files make up the bulk of downloads from the Linn Records online service

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25

Blu-rays

you'll want to buy in 2014

Action sequels, comic book capers, sci-fi reboots and Biblical epics are just some of the disc highlights coming your way this year.

Team HCC builds its wishlist ➤



A Dark Elf army will be invading your movie den when *Thor 2* goes Blu

THOR: THE DARK WORLD

The second solo outing for Marvel's God of Thunder proved more popular at the box office than the original – and you can expect it to be even more popular on Blu-ray, where the movie's blend of fantasy and sci-fi action is guaranteed to deliver some equally mammoth AV thrills. Fans can also look forward to another in the series of 'Marvel One-Shot' shorts on the disc, possibly featuring the return of Ben Kingsley's Mandarin from *Iron Man 3*.

Estimated BD release:
March 2014



GRAVITY

The surprise smash hit of 2013 sees Alfonso Cuarón return to the director's chair for the first time since 2006's *Children of Men*. A flag-bearer for no-compromise AV – *Gravity* dazzled theatre-goers with its astonishing 3D visuals and Dolby Atmos soundtrack – we're hoping much of that makes the jump to BD.

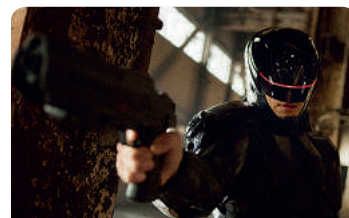
Estimated BD release:
March 2014



THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG

Peter Jackson's opening ...*Hobbit* movie finished on a teasing image of the dragon Smaug – this sequel ups the fire-breathing scaly monster antics and delves deeper into the secrets of the One Ring. If history is anything to go by, expect the initial BD release to be followed by an extras-packed Extended Edition later in the year.

Estimated BD release:
March/November 2014



ROBOCOP

We don't expect this remake of the fondly-remembered 1980s sci-fi movie to be quite as blood-soaked and violent, but director Jose Padilha has shown his action chops with the well-choreographed *Elite Squad* films, and just the thought of seeing ED-209 once more is enough to have us hovering over the pre-order button.

Estimated BD release:
July 2014

300: RISE OF AN EMPIRE

Why have we been kept waiting eight years for a sequel to the 2006 sword 'n' sandals smash hit *300*? Zeus only knows, but hopefully this visually similar tale, which takes the battle between the Persians and Greeks to the high seas, will be equally impressive. Sadly, original director Zack Snyder is no longer behind the lens (he's working on *Batman vs Superman*), but he remains onboard as writer/producer. Get ready to shout 'This. Is. Sparta!' all over again.

Estimated BD release:
August 2014



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2

Sony's stereoscopic 2012 reboot arrived on Blu-ray sporting one of the most impressive 1080p transfers around (and later earned a 'Mastered in 4K' release). Yet for this sequel – which pits Spidey against Electro, Rhino and the Green Goblin – returning director Marc Webb is switching from digital photography to 35mm and the 3D is being converted in post. Will the young web-slinger look as stunning this time around?

Estimated BD release:
October 2014



JACK RYAN: SHADOW RECRUIT

A fifth screen outing for Tom Clancy's espionage hero...*Shadow Recruit* reboots the series with Chris Pine following in the footsteps of Alec Baldwin, Harrison Ford and Ben Affleck. Kenneth Brannagh directs – but this should more similar in tone to his recent *Thor* than *Henry V*...

Estimated BD release:
May 2014



GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

The tenth film set in Marvel's 'Cinematic Universe', *Guardians...* galactic heroes might not be as familiar to audiences as the likes of Hulk (Rocket Raccoon, anyone?), but it would be foolish to expect a miss-step from the current masters of the multiplex. Like *Avengers Assemble*, only in outer space.

Estimated BD release:
December 2014



THE EXPENDABLES 3

Sylvester Stallone has rounded up the muscle-bound gang (and added some fresh blood in the form of Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson and Wesley Snipes) for another bout of nostalgia-tinged, subwoofer-bothering crash-bang-wallop. The Blu-ray will probably be loaded with extras, too.

Estimated BD release:
December 2014

INCOMING CLASSICS

Back-catalogue titles getting a refresh on BD

Dead of Night



StudioCanal follows up *The Wicker Man* with another British horror classic in the form of Ealing Studio's 1945 portmanteau shocker.

ETA: February 2014

The Abyss



James Cameron's aquatic sci-fi fable looks set to – finally! – make a splash on Blu-ray in 2014 to

mark the film's 25th anniversary.
ETA: August 2014

Twin Peaks



CBS's damn fine boxset promises the entire TV series, the spin-off film and exclusive new extras.

ETA: March 2014

Nashville

Robert Altman's acclaimed 1975 musical drama will be joining Eureka's Masters of Cinema line-up.

ETA: May 2014

The Stuff

This wacky killer pudding flick will get its just desserts when Arrow Video cooks up a Blu-ray release. Expect plenty of juicy bonus bits.

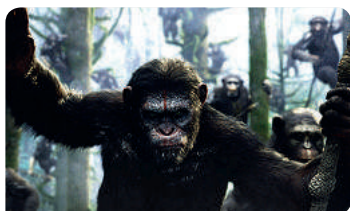
ETA: March 2014



EDGE OF TOMORROW

Tom Cruise returns to sci-fi only a year after *Oblivion*, this time in a time-travel-cum-alien-attack movie based upon an illustrated Japanese novella and helmed by Doug 'Bourne Identity' Liman. *HCC* favourites Emily Blunt and Bill Paxton are also along for what looks set to be an action-packed ride.

Estimated BD release:
November 2014



DAWN OF THE PLANET OF APES

The last time we checked in with the simian science-fiction saga, Caesar was leading his fellow ape escapees into the woods of northern California and the human race was battling a lethal virus. This \$120m sequel picks up the story years later. Monkeys firing guns? Don't bet against it.

Estimated BD release:
November 2014



NOAH

The Biblical tale of Noah's Ark is brought to the bigscreen with Russell Crowe in the title role, and trailers have teased a dark, large-scale epic with some of the most eye-popping SFX (courtesy of Industrial Light & Magic) ever conceived. A somewhat troubled production could result in a Director's Cut BD down the line.

Estimated BD release:
July 2014



GODZILLA

Ready for another 2014 reboot? The legendary Japanese Kaiju will be stomping around your cinema yet again courtesy of this \$160m blockbuster that aims to erase the memory of Roland Emmerich's limp 1998 effort. Gareth 'Monsters' Edwards is behind the camera, while *Breaking Bad*'s Bryan Cranston is among those being dwarfed by the titular anti-hero.

Estimated BD release:
September 2014

X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

Touted as 20th Century Fox's second most expensive movie after *Avatar*, this fifth trip into the world of the X-Men unites the young guns of *...First Class* with the original trilogy crew and marks the return to the fold of director Bryan Singer. Promising the long-awaited screen debut of the comics' gigantic robotic Sentinels, it'll be interesting to see what the mega-budget translates to on the silver screen.

Estimated BD release:
October 2014



OLDBOY

After Steven Spielberg and Will Smith's early involvement, it's now fallen to Spike Lee and Josh Brolin to recraft the celebrated South Korean thriller for Western audiences. The theatrical release clocks in at 104 minutes, but rumours suggest that a much longer edit may see the light of day on Blu-ray, too.

Estimated BD release:
March 2014

Transformers 4 is the first film to be shot using smaller digital IMAX 3D cameras



TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION

The toytastic franchise continues under the guidance of action tsar Michael Bay, albeit with Mark Wahlberg replacing Shia LaBeouf in playing second fiddle to the titular CG 'robots in disguise' (including a redesigned Optimus Prime and the bigscreen debut of the Dinobots). The previous instalments in the series have always resulted in demo-worthy Blu-ray releases, so look out for a pixel-perfect 3D platter.

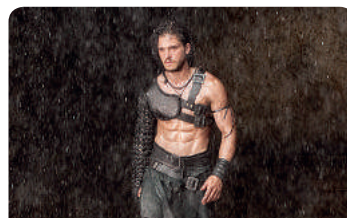
Estimated BD release:
October 2014



NEED FOR SPEED

Aiming to steal pole position from Universal's *Fast & Furious* series, this new flick from DreamWorks takes the name of the popular videogame franchise as the basis for a cross-country race thriller that will undoubtedly go heavy on hi-octane stunts.

Estimated BD release:
August 2014



POMPEII

Another historical epic to join *Noah* and *300: Rise of an Empire*. Paul W.S. Anderson's involvement means this will probably be a little more concerned with fan-pleasing slow-motion stereoscopic sword-fighting than painstaking realism. Not that we'd complain.

Estimated BD release:
June 2014



47 RONIN

This fantasy actioner, based on the Japanese fable of masterless Samurai plotting revenge, adds Keanu Reeves (playing a half-British, half-Japanese outcast, in case you're wondering) to a cast of native stars. A massive production in both SFX and budget, it should prove to be a brilliant-looking HD release.

Estimated BD release:
April 2014



ESCAPE PLAN

After spending years off the screen as Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger's career rehabilitation continues in this prison-based actioner, alongside fellow genre icon Sylvester Stallone. One-liners! Punch-ups! Improbable stunts! *Escape Plan* will have it all.

Blu-ray release:

February 24

THE LEGO MOVIE

Batman, Wonder Woman, Abraham Lincoln and Ninja Turtles can all be found in this spoof-laden cartoon from the directors of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* and *21 Jump Street*. Look out for dazzling CG visuals and the inevitable free LEGO minifigure when the BD lands.

Blu-ray release:

June 2014



GET YOUR GAMING FIX

A quartet of console titles to look out for in 2014...

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain



Solid Snake brings his trademark stealth tactics to next-gen consoles with this latest open-world sneak

'em up from Hideo Kojima.

ETA: April 2014

Mad Max

Vehicular mayhem in a post-apocalyptic world is the order of the day in this open-world action game based on the cult film series.

ETA: October 2014

Titanfall



Fight either on foot or in heavily armoured mechs in this online-only multiplayer shooter that is being touted

as the Xbox One's killer app.

ETA: March 2014

Watch Dogs

Ubisoft hopes to kickstart another successful gaming franchise with the arrival of this stunning third-person action adventure set in a near-future version of Chicago.

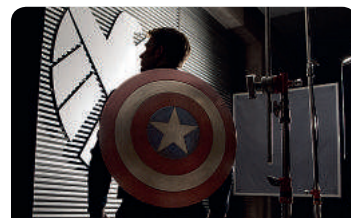
ETA: May 2014

SIN CITY: A DAME TO KILL FOR

Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller have made good on years of promises and are going to take us back to the seedy underbelly of Basin City with this sequel to their ultra-violent 2005 hit. Josh Brolin stars in the anthology's lead story about a particularly deadly *femme fatale* played by Eva Green, and the supporting cast includes everyone from Ray Liotta to Lady Gaga. If the original film is anything to go by, we reckon the eventual Blu-ray will be packed with bonus goodies.

Blu-ray release:

December 2014



CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER

More from Marvel, this follow-up outing for Cap (Chris Evans) sees him caught up in a global conspiracy that involves a ghost from his past. Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow and Anthony Mackie's Falcon keep him company in a popcorn flick that leads into 2015's *Avengers Assemble: Age of Ultron*.

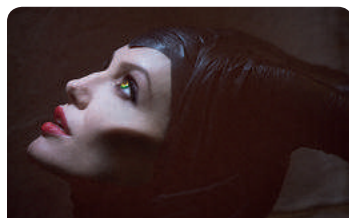
Blu-ray release:

September 2014



Jessica Alba returns as Nancy in one of *A Dame to Kill For*'s four stories

Josh Brolin takes over the role of Dwight from Clive Owen



MALEFICENT

Angelina Jolie shows off her wicked side in this live-action fantasy that recounts 'the untold story' of the villain from Disney's 1959 animation *Sleeping Beauty*. Director Richard Stromberg makes his debut, but with his previous work as a production designer earning two Oscars – for *Avatar* and *Alice in Wonderland* – this should look sublime.

Blu-ray release:
October 2014



THE MUPPETS MOST WANTED

Kermit and the gang are joined by Ricky Gervais and Tina Fey in this globetrotting crime caper about a master thief who looks just like the world's favourite frog... 2012's *The Muppets* BD featured a 7.1 DTS-HD MA mix to accompany Bret McKenzie's award-winning songs – fingers crossed we get another reference-grade disc ■

Blu-ray release:
August 2014

THIS IS ALL ABOUT THE SOUND

The M&K Sound X Serie Subwoofers



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4K party room



Mark Craven reports on a basement cinema that incorporates both a high-end projector and table football

YOU KNOW HOW it is. You've decided you want a dedicated cinema room in your house, so you call in the professionals. Then, when they arrive, they notice that the space you originally had in mind isn't quite as impressive and up to the task as your basement, which you'd already planned to be an all-purpose party space – and had got as far as installing cabling for PA speakers and disco lights. And fitted a dancefloor...

Okay, so maybe that isn't the situation that every *HCC* reader finds themselves in, but is exactly what occurred when Oxfordshire-based install outfit Overture were employed to deliver a home theatre. And having seen the bigger basement space, they quickly persuaded the owner to change his thinking, especially when it was pointed out that by adding a bar at the rear of the room they could still fit a socialising/party

area. The basement, after all, was some 13 metres long.

Ready and waiting for 4K

With the decision made, the hardware was specified. Key to this room's appeal is its forward-thinking attitude – a 4K-capable Sony VPL-VW1000ES projector is ceiling-mounted above and behind the second four-seat tier of Front Row cinema recliners.



The 4m screen from Seymour AV hides the M&K Sound speakers used for the L/C/R channels



Rear speakers are housed in-ceiling, either side of the Sony 4K projector



The length of the room allowed a bar/games area to be included

The projector is fed by an Oppo Blu-ray player, although it's safe to assume that the owner will upgrade to a 4K source as soon as one becomes available. At the other end of the room images are displayed upon a fixed four-metre acoustically-transparent screen from US specialist Seymour AV.

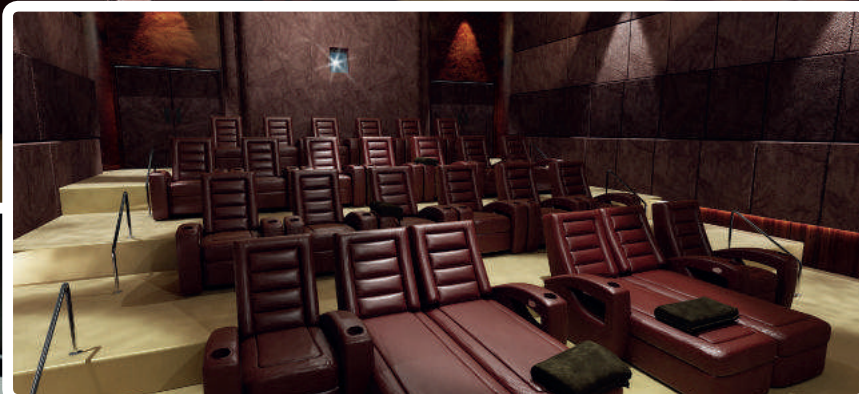
For audio, the kit rack combines Parasound Halo amplification and Integra processing. This feeds the 7.2 speaker array from M&K Sound.

The surround channels are wall-mounted, while the rears are housed discreetly in the ceiling as the back wall is simply too far away.

With the basic structure of the room (within a property built in 1740) unable to be altered, Overture applied acoustic treatments to the walls and ceilings to reduce sonic anomalies, including the bountiful use of fabrics. Everything is colour-matched to look modern and distinctly classy, and the ceiling-recessed

lighting array, downlights and floor-level illumination – as well as the hardware and automated blinds – are all controlled via a Control 4 system.

The owner, I'm told, is delighted with the finished result, not only in terms of movie playback but also for listening to music. And with table football and a well-stocked bar also on offer, we doubt he spends that much time in the rest of the house ■



Serious Home Cinema



demands some Serious AV Separates



Pioneer
BDP-160
Blu-ray Player
and SC LX57
AV Receiver



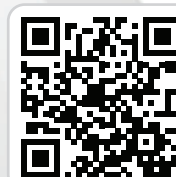
If you're serious about your Home Entertainment, make sure you consult a dealer who really understands the latest products, who can demonstrate equipment properly and help you select what's right for your home and budget, whether it's big or small.

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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** PIONEER £2,000 SC-LX87 nine-channel AV receiver
 SONY Full HD SXRD projector MICROSOFT Xbox One games console DALI FAZON MIKRO 5.1 sub/sat
 speaker system EPSON Affordable HD Ready projector SONOS Play:1 multiroom speaker ROUNDUP Six
 65in 4K TVs go head-to-head ROUNDUP 'Soundbase' speakers put to the test AND MORE!

Magic circles

Monitor Audio's redesigned Radius speakers
 promise high-end audio from a small package.
 See p52 for more

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



Powerhouse AVR in need of a polish?

Pioneer's premium integrated AV receiver is certainly a technical marvel, yet [Ed Selley](#) wonders if it is a little too clever for its own good

PIONEER'S RANGE OF AV receivers caters to budgets from the extremely frugal to the decidedly lavish. If you feel that you sit in the latter category, you will need to look at the top of the pile and the SC-LX87. And, although this flagship might not be as pricey as some of the company's previous one-box offerings (such as the SC-LX90), it's still a very serious amplifier indeed.

The basic specs only really tell half the story. The THX Ultra2-certified Pioneer packs nine channels of Class D amplification into the substantial chassis. Each is rated at 220W (albeit at a slightly benign six ohm measurement); most speakers are unlikely to prove a problem for it. The use of Class D amps (here known as Direct Energy HD) isn't merely a convenience feature either, as Pioneer

opts for these energy-efficient compact power plants in products where there is no need to save any room. And in keeping with Pioneer AV receivers of recent years, the SC-LX87 has been tuned by AIR Studios in London to further try and improve performance.

As you might expect, the connectivity available to you to make use of this amplification is epic. Nine HDMI inputs are on



The AVR is packed with features – so is the supplied remote



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
9.2-channel
networked AVR

POSITION:
Top of the current
Pioneer lineup

PEERS:
Yamaha RX-A3030;
Onkyo TX-NR3010;
Sony STR-
DA5800ES

offer, which can in turn serve three outputs (one to a second zone). Additionally, the Pioneer supports a legacy set of component and composite video connections. These can naturally be transcoded to HDMI; 4K upscaling is provided in addition to 'normal' hi-def resolutions. Audio Return Channel and standby passthrough are also supported.

Audiophile ambitions

The audio side of the Pioneer is equally ambitious. There are several assignable digital and analogue audio connections that should allow hookup to almost anything you could expect to be sat on a rack near the AVR – you even get a moving magnet phono stage, which is a nice touch, although I suspect the number of turntables any given SC-LX87 will see can be counted on the fingers of one knee. Audio processing is handled by an ESS Sabre32 Ultra DAC, allowing for all audio to be upsampled to 32-bit/192kHz. Indeed, this resolution can be handled natively – files can be streamed from a computer directly to the SC-LX87 via USB, and Pioneer supplies an ASIO driver to aid this. Another useful sonic treat is Spotify Connect, should you be a fan of the music streaming service.

The Pioneer is also network-capable via Ethernet or a supplied LAN adapter and here things aren't quite so slick. The provided setup information for the LAN adapter is lengthy but somewhat baffling and I eventually simply ran a long Ethernet cable to my router instead. Pioneer has since furnished me with instructions that make the process slightly easier, but it is still some way from being plug-n-play. This operational challenge is a shame because once you do get the SC-LX87 up and running on a network the streaming options are useful and you can make use of the superior iControlAV2013 app to drive the receiver. Certainly, this app is preferable to the bundled remote control. This is a cluttered mess of tiny buttons that offers a choice of 'basic' functions, which turns too many useful features off, or 'Expert', which makes it far too easy to switch to Zone B and C – pretty pointless if you aren't using them. Less tech-savvy family members will hate it, although it does, however, match well with the onscreen menus that are equally small and intermittently illogical.

The remote is pretty much the only bum note in what is otherwise a very nice piece of industrial design. The Pioneer looks imposing >



without being a leviathan, thanks to clean lines and a small number of visible controls. Blue LEDs and chrome detailing help to break up the unrelenting blackness. The only minor annoyance is that one of the protective plugs in the terminals refused to come out; I had to use bare wire connections on that speaker.

After running Pioneer's excellent MCACC auto setup, which gave accurate distance, crossover and EQ settings for my Mordant Short Mezzos and Tannoy sub, the AVR showed some very likeable attributes from the outset.

'In terms of clarity and coherence, the SC-LX87 is a seriously accomplished AV receiver'

The Class D amplification imparts a character to the performance that I have heard in some of Pioneer's stereo amps. There is a richness to its presentation that means the SC-LX87 never sounds forward or harsh but instead manages to be big, controlled and full-bodied even when driven with ferocity. Integration between speakers and sub is seamless.

This means that the Pioneer's rendition of *Fast and Furious 6* is a fantastic combination of bombast and accuracy. The chase sequence with the tank – as magnificently silly a scene as any – is hugely powerful but packed with detail and a real sense of the relationship of objects to one another. Yet the stand-out skill of the Pioneer is perhaps its ability with voices. Even when all hell is breaking loose on screen, the SC-LX87 keeps dialogue crystal-clear and perfectly placed. In terms of clarity and coherence, this is a seriously accomplished receiver.

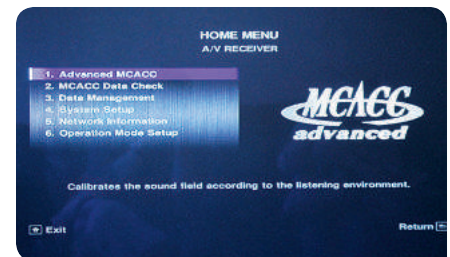
Around the back of the SC-LX87 you'll find more connections than you'll probably ever need

As the numbers suggest, there is no shortage of power here, and because of the smoothness and clarity the SC-LX87 possesses you can create truly vast soundscapes without strain. The vastness of *Star Trek Into Darkness* is bread and butter to the Japanese amp but it is just as at home with the claustrophobic forests of *Troll Hunter* – in both cases the soundfield is completely convincing. This same smoothness and control makes the Pioneer a refined performer in stereo mode, although what keeps explosions under control in films can make the SC-LX87 sound ever so slightly safe with music.

Conventional broadcast material is also well handled and the unflappable nature of the Pioneer means that there is very little you can find, even at the wackier end of the TV guide, that will upset it. With very warm-sounding speakers it is possible that the SC-LX87 might come across as a little dull, but with anything that is remotely neutral, you should find this an AVR that you can kick back with for long periods without it ever sounding fatiguing. Of course, if you do get bored, you can spend some time tinkering with EQ settings on the fly with the app – although while fun I struggled to really improve things.

There is a great deal to like about the SC-LX87 as an AVR. It is a powerful, refined and detailed performer that is as happy with full-bore action as it is with art house intimacy. The feature set is also extremely good and there is no doubting its technical ability. The complex network setup, clunky interface and fiddly remote do take some of the sheen off, though. Sonically, the Pioneer is too good to ignore but it might cause you a few frustrations getting there. Still, many of the best things in life require you to work for them, eh? ■

ON THE MENU



→ Pioneer's onscreen menus include an option to blank out in-depth setup tweaks to stop them being fiddled with by accident. Ignore that and you can get your hands dirty with plenty of parameters, although the presentation can be frustrating at times

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And Neo:X
THX: Yes. Ultra2
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 9 x 220W (six ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Up to three zones
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)
HDMI: 9 x inputs; 3 x outputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
COMPONENT VIDEO: 3 x inputs
DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 441(d) 185(h)mm
WEIGHT: 18.1kg
ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; Wi-Fi via supplied adaptor; 1 x USB for file playback; 1 x Type B USB-DAC input; MCACC auto calibration; iOS/Android control app; internet radio; vTuner; Windows 8 certified; DLNA networking; Spotify; ESS Sabre32 Ultra DAC; 32-bit/192kHz support; Audio Return Channel; standby passthrough; 4K passthrough; MP3, WAV, FLAC, AAC, WMA, AIFF, Apple Lossless, DSD compatibility; Direct Energy HD amplifier; Bluetooth via adaptor; RS-232; 11.2-channel pre-out; AirPlay; AM/FM tuner; PQLS; Advanced Sound Retriever

HCC VERDICT



Pioneer SC-LX87

→ £2,000 Approx → <http://www.pioneer.eu/uk>
 → Tel: 0330 123 1240

HIGHS: Powerful, controlled and refined sound; solid build; excellent connectivity and control app; 11.2-channel pre-out
LOWS: Complex network setup; poor remote and slightly obtuse menu interface; sound may be too smooth for some

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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October 2013 - Precision 6.2



Precision 6.2



Precision 6.4



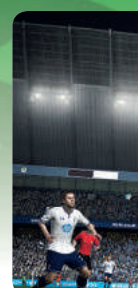
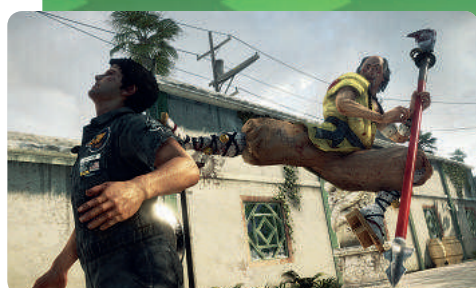
Precision 6.2 / 6.1 / 6C /
TS2.12 system



Precision 6.2 / 6.1 / 6C /
TS2.12 system

40 XBOX ONE → Approx £430

'It's obvious as soon as you visit the Xbox One's dashboard that it's keen to be more than just a mere gaming device'



Xbox One is open for AV business

Joyypad-junkie **John Archer** finds out if Microsoft's long-awaited new console is good for anything more than playing *Call of Duty* again

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Next-gen games console/Blu-ray & media player

POSITION:

Microsoft's replacement for the Xbox 360

PEERS:

Sony PlayStation 4

CONSIDERING WHAT A success the Xbox 360 has become since its 2005 launch, with its groundbreaking network play and ever-growing media portal/hub functionality, the Xbox One's journey to shop shelves was surprisingly uncomfortable.

From the start its reputation with gamers was hammered by numerous ill-judged consumer-unfriendly proclamations from manufacturer Microsoft, culminating in the revelation that the Xbox One would only be available with a Kinect motion/voice sensor despite this adding £80 to the console's price and the original Kinect being deeply unpopular.

Hardcore gamers were also upset by Microsoft forever talking up the Xbox One as a home entertainment hub rather than focusing on its gaming talents. Then it transpired that the PlayStation 4 versions of some key launch titles were running at appreciably higher resolutions than the Xbox One iterations.

Yup, the Xbox One took a pasting in the pre-launch PR battle. But is the console really the disaster many predicted?

Heavy-duty hardware

First impressions aren't great. Compared with the smaller PS4, the Xbox One is a brick – a brick accompanied by a massive external power transformer. Making one half of the body glossy and the other matt does nothing to make it more exciting to look at, either.

On the upside, the Xbox One's extra bulk helps it run almost silently compared with the wind farm sonics of its predecessor, while the external power transformer and new auto-adaptive fan system should avoid the Xbox 360's 'red rings of death' overheating issue.

Tucked inside the hefty chassis is an eight-core AMD custom CPU, an 853MHz GPU with 768 shader cores, a Blu-ray player (the Xbox 360 only had a DVD player) and 500GB of built-in memory. This built-in HDD can't be swapped out for a bigger one like the PS4's can, but Microsoft is promising support for external storage soon.

It's obvious as soon as you visit the Xbox One's dashboard that it's keen to be far more than just a gaming device. Apps are available for Netflix, LoveFilm, Xbox's own Video and Music platforms, 4OD, Demand 5, YouTube, Crackle and Eurosport. There's no ITV Player or BBC iPlayer at the time of writing, but the latter of these at least is expected soon.

Also missing currently are multimedia playback from USB devices or any app for pulling in content via DLNA from networked devices. However, the Xbox One can be used as a destination for multimedia via external DLNA-compatible media servers like the iOS/Android Skifta app.

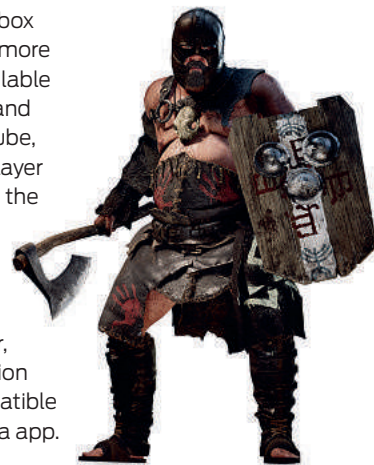
Connectivity includes an HDMI input alongside the HDMI output, which introduces arguably the console's most aggressive 'beyond gaming' feature: the ability to play TV receivers through it, bringing your TV viewing into the Xbox One's domain. So you could, say, switch instantly from playing a game to watching TV without needing a remote. Or you could watch TV in a small secondary window while you continue gaming.

The console can also control your set-top box via an EPG and an external IR sender in the Kinect (one reason why the Kinect is deemed essential). You can even partner the TV footage with supporting online content.

Frustratingly, though, much of this TV functionality is currently only available in America, due to Microsoft not having deep working relationships with other territories' broadcasting platforms. Hopefully this situation will change soon.

The American bias of the video loopthrough feature is also apparent in the way 50Hz sources suffer heavy judder when fed through the Xbox One due to its native US-based 60Hz output. You can 'fool' the console into outputting at 50Hz by telling it you can't see a 60Hz 1080p signal even when you can. But not having a 50Hz option to select is daft.

With so many content options, the Xbox One's interface is clearly of tantamount



Slasher of Rome: Son of Rome is one of the Xbox One's exclusive launch titles

The Xbox One's new GPU yields better visuals over the 360



importance, and it's here where the console really starts to shine thanks, ironically, to the much-maligned Kinect system, which lets you navigate your console simply by talking to it. My test room now echoes with phrases like 'Xbox, play *Forza 5*'; 'Xbox, watch TV'; 'Xbox, go to settings' and 'Xbox, record that' – the latter commands the console to store the last 30 seconds of gameplay. Great for showing off. After a little effort to learn what phrases work with the voice recognition, it became a feature that I couldn't imagine being without.

The other big functionality leap the Xbox One delivers is multi-tasking. You can effortlessly shift between games and apps without having to quit each one first, and there's a nifty 'Snap' feature that lets you leave apps playing in the corner of the picture while you do other stuff on the main screen. I suffered one or two 'hung' apps during multi-tasking switches, but for the most part it works slickly and becomes indispensable.

Ready to Ryse...

Firing up some games reveals a bigger leap forward from the Xbox 360 than I'd expected. Detail levels are far superior, colours are richer and subtler, and fluidity and frame-rate stability are both vastly improved. Games like

'Game graphics are a bigger step up from the Xbox 360 than you might have previously imagined'

Ryse: Son Of Rome and especially *Forza 5* – which, crucially, runs butter-smooth at 1080p/60Hz, proving the Xbox really can handle such feeds – are particularly great demos of the console's abilities. But, really, every title looks far better than anything the 360 could deliver, even the grubby but magnificently fun *Dead Rising 3*.

Battlefield 4 and *COD: Ghosts* do look marginally better on the PS4, but the differences aren't as pronounced as the launch hysteria would have you believe. For me the best-looking game currently available on either console is the Xbox-exclusive *Forza 5*.

Microsoft claims its console is capable of 3,840 x 2,160 output, and says there's no reason why games couldn't work at this resolution. I can't help but feel sceptical about this, though, given that the Xbox One seemingly struggles to manage 1080p. I look forward to being proved wrong...



The Xbox One controller claims 40 improvements over its predecessor, including vibrating 'impulse triggers'

All the big titles on the Xbox One sound fabulous, with digital surround tracks of consistently good quality – especially in *Ryse's* case. Microsoft's Xbox Live service, meanwhile, remains rock-solid in contrast to the sporadic network outages I've experienced on the PS4.

The more I gamed on the Xbox One the more I found I slightly preferred its joy pad to the PS4's DualShock controller, even though the new shoulder buttons occasionally feel oddly unresponsive.

Look! It plays CDs!

Shifting to the Xbox One's AV features, it's good to find that unlike the PS4 it can play CDs as well as Blu-rays and DVDs. However, as with the PS4, 3D BDs weren't supported at launch.

The Blu-ray player's quality is perfectly decent, producing pictures that are clean, reasonably crisp, and richly coloured from my *Oblivion* Blu-ray test disc – although the gamma output is perhaps a touch darker than I'd ideally like – accompanied by 5.1 and 7.1 audio tracks. It loads discs considerably faster than the PS4, too.

Oddly, the digital optical output can't currently handle Dolby Digital 5.1 like the HDMI can, but this will apparently be fixed by a future software update. There are other 'lost feature' oddities. There's no battery monitor for your controller, for instance, and insanely there's currently no way of managing the console's 500GB of memory.

However, while the Xbox One's niggles leave it feeling like a work in progress, even as it stands it still delivers a tangible 'next-gen' leap on numerous fronts. And in doing so it's made us realise that, contrary to our expectations and pending what we suspect will be a reasonably imminent price cut, we actually do want our new games console to be more than just a games console after all ■

ON THE MENU



→ With its colourful tiles, the Xbox One dashboard is reminiscent of the Windows 8 platform. It's fast and intuitive to navigate, although you may find it simpler still to use the Kinect-based voice control functionality

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. 500GB (non-upgradeable)
CONNECTIONS: 1 x HDMI input; 1 x HDMI output; Ethernet; optical digital audio output; 2 x USB
DIMENSIONS: 333(w) x 274(d) x 79(d)mm
WEIGHT: 3.2kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Blu-ray (not 3D), DVD and CD playback; 8GB Flash memory; 8-core AMD Custom CPU; 853MHz GPU; Cloud gaming; Kinect supplied with package; voice control; gesture control; multi-tasking with 'Snap' feature; 'record that' 30-second game DVR; Xbox Live online play system; SmartGlass App on Android, iOS, Windows Phone and Windows 8; multimedia playback as client device; Xbox Video and Music; Netflix; LoveFilm; 4OD; Demand 5; YouTube; Crackle

HCC VERDICT



Xbox One

→ £430 Approx → www.xbox.com
 → Tel: 0800 587 1102

HIGHS: Kinect delivers a true next-gen interface; graphics are a bigger step up from the Xbox 360 than you might think; robust online platform
LOWS: Key TV functionality currently limited outside US; currently no 3D playback, no USB multimedia playback and no memory management; Kinect makes it expensive

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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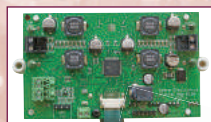
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- Supports IR and RS-232 Control
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Code PU513L £250.75

Digital to Analogue Audio Converter with USB

This DAC has all of the inputs and outputs the everyday audiophile will need. One optical, one coaxial, and one USB inputs are enough for most applications. Up to three digital sources – Blu-ray player, cable box, CD player, computer, DVD player, HD games console, media player and set-top box etc. can be connected concurrently using S/PDIF coaxial, toslink optical inputs or USB port. DAC is the ideal converter for music lovers seeking an excellent value upgrade to 24 bit advanced HD (high definition) audio.

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Code DAC £39.00

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Code IPMSW1 £119.99

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- Input: 1 x HDMI
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Code HDCVC £69.00

HDMI Distribution Amplifiers

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Code HDC12 1 HDMI input to 2 HDMI outputs

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Code HDC14 1 HDMI input to 4 HDMI outputs

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Code HDC18 1 HDMI input to 8 HDMI outputs

£114.99



VGA to HDMI

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Code VGAHDMIP

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Sony's budget theatre of dreams

The Japanese giant supplements its 4K range with this latest 'entry-level' Full HD model. **John Archer** can scarcely believe the value on offer



AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Full HD 3D-capable projector using Sony's SXRD technology

POSITION:

Sony's mid-range home theatre PJ, between the continuing VPL-HW30ES and VPL-VW95ES

PEERS:

JVC DLA-X35; Panasonic PT-AT6000E

IN A PERFECT world we'd all be able to set ourselves up with one of Sony's ground-breaking VPL-VW500ES 4K projectors. But most of us don't live in a perfect world, or anything close. Finding the £8,800 necessary for a VPL-VW500ES just isn't an option.

Happily, though, Sony has come up with a pretty excellent 'consolation prize' in the shape of the VPL-HW55ES. This projector doesn't enjoy a 4K resolution, but its Full HD pixel count is backed up by some impressive other specifications, and can be yours for the vastly more attainable sum of £2,800.

You get a lot of projector for your money, too. Its dimensions in each direction exceed

those of most sub-£3,000 projectors, and its size is emphasised – though tastefully so – by the way its upper edge arcs up.

This bulging mid-section fits over a large centrally-mounted lens, and the whole attractively-sculpted thing comes clad in a nice high-gloss white or black finish.

The VPL-HW55ES's connections (including twin HDMI's) are side- rather than rear-mounted. This could present some people with minor install issues, but it's hardly a deal-breaker. An RJ-45 port is there for adding an external 3D transmitter (IR or RF) if your room layout requires one. There's also an optional wireless HDMI kit.

At the VPL-HW55ES's heart is Sony's SXRD projection technology, delivering a promising claimed contrast ratio of 120,000:1 and an equally promising maximum light output of 1,700 Lumens that could prove handy with 3D. The contrast ratio is dependent on a dynamic iris system rather than being a native figure, but this is to be expected (unless you're a JVC D-ILA model) and doesn't mean the image can't still look the business so long as the dynamic iris system is effectively implemented.

As with its predecessor, the VPL-HW50ES, the VPL-HW55ES sports a lamp control system that syncs its output with the machinations of Sony's active shutter glasses to deliver a brighter, more colourful 3D image. Other notable features include Sony's Reality Creation image processing for enhanced detail and colours; electronic RGB panel alignment; 11 gamma presets and Sony's Real Colour Processing suite.

This new model is straightforward to set up. There are tactile vertical and horizontal image shift wheels on top, the zoom ring around the lens delivers a good 1.6x level of optical zoom, and the focus ring permits precise adjustments. Within just moments you'll be watching focused, accurately sized images with no digital keystone distortions required. And about 30 seconds after that your mouth will likely be hanging open in awe...

Sci-fi stunner

Feeding the projector two of the finest-looking Blu-rays known to man, *Oblivion* and *Pacific Rim*, it produced pictures so good I had to triple-check the £2,800 price.

Initial impressions are of stunning detail and sharpness. Both discs deliver reference levels of texturing and detail, and every last pixel of that quality appears with the upmost precision via Sony's affordable light-cannon. In fact, while purists will probably choose not to use the feature, Sony's Reality Creation system seems to take sharpness beyond vanilla Full HD. The extreme clarity of the hulls of *Pacific Rim*'s Jaegers is spectacular.

Reality Creation can get messy if you force up its Resolution and Noise Filtering settings, and its effectiveness understandably deteriorates with lower-quality sources. Leave the Resolution and Noise Filtering options set >



Sony's handset is simple to use and, crucially, backlit



The VPL-HW55ES comes in both white and black finishes



Side-mounted inputs include twin HDMI and an RJ-45 socket for adding an external 3D transmitter

to between 10 and 20, though, and having Reality Creation in play proves worthwhile.

Easier to resist are the VPL-HW55ES's Motionflow options. Despite some modes being well balanced by the standards of the motion processing world at large, they all still deliver a few unwanted side effects.

The most interesting Motionflow mode is Film Projection, which 'disguises' judder by attempting to recreate the slight flickering effect associated with traditional 24p commercial cinema projection. It won't be to everyone's tastes, but it's worth an extended trial – even if at first you don't like it.

Contributing to the VPL-HW55ES's good pictures is its dynamism. Pictures are brighter than they were on the VPL-HW50ES, but have

'With 3D Blu-rays, the projector's excellent contrast helps deliver a rich sense of depth and space'

been delivered without compromising black level response. On the contrary, black levels are better, and combine with the enhanced brightness to deliver a fabulous contrast range.

JVC's DLA models can still out-punch the VPL-HW55ES where sheer black level depth is concerned, but that prowess isn't married to levels of brightness to rival the Sony.

The VPL-HW55ES's huge visual range has a beneficial effect on its colour reproduction, helping hues explode off the screen. This is particularly obvious with the colour-rich *Pacific Rim* – particularly the sequences set in the film's various city locations. The Sony lays on rich saturations, but with subtlety and accuracy. In fact, images using some of the

picture presets are startlingly accurate right out of the box, and the colour definition on show with even the trickiest colour blends is ridiculously good for the money.

Usually when testing projectors in a fully blacked-out room I use a projector's low-output lamp option to boost black levels and reduce running noise. However, the VPL-HW55ES handles its light so intelligently – even if you ignore the dynamic iris feature – and runs so quietly for such a bright machine that I found myself unable to resist the extra punch you get from its brightest lamp setting.

The Sony's 2D heroics aren't quite replicated with *Pacific Rim*'s 3D platter. Using the default 3D setting I was still impressed by the brightness and colour saturation, while the PJ's excellent contrast performance delivers a rich sense of depth and space, and detail levels are high. Yet that old active 3D chestnut of crosstalk noise is readily apparent over many sharply contrasting objects, especially if they're in the background.

Pacific Rim's near-constant use of bright, colourful lights in its backdrops is certainly not the VPL-HW55ES's friend. There is, fortunately, a crosstalk fix: reducing the 3D Glasses Brightness option from Max to Min. However, this really hammers the image's brightness. Many users will thus probably prefer a compromised middle setting – but you'll still notice some crosstalk in such a configuration.

Despite its slightly compromised 3D pictures, Sony has come up with a marvel in the VPL-HW55ES. Its pictures are more dynamic than those of Panasonic's now-aging AT6000E and JVC's DLA-X35, and it's fair to say it represents a truly Jaeger-scale opponent for Epson's incoming EH-TW9200 Kaiju. Let battle commence! ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter (two pairs of glasses supplied)

ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI v1.4; component video input; IR input; RS-232; D-Sub PC port; RJ-45 input (for adding optional external 3D transmission extender)

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,700 Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 120,000:1

DIMENSIONS: 407.4(w) x 463.9(d) x 179.2(hmm)

WEIGHT: 9.6kg

FEATURES: SXRD projection system; Reality Creation processing; Motionflow processing; optional wireless HDMI kit; Sony's Real Colour Processing colour management system; multiple themed gamma presets; vertical and horizontal image shift; 1.6x optical zoom; 40-300in screen size support; dynamic iris system; intelligent lamp system for 3D; 3D Glasses brightness adjustment; 21dB claimed fan noise

HCC VERDICT



Sony VPL-HW55ES

→ £2,800 Approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Spectacular 2D picture quality; easy to set up; great value

LOWS: Crosstalk with 3D unless you greatly reduce brightness; standard 3D system is IR rather than RF; Reality Creation can get noisy if not set carefully

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Mikro machines with a sense of maturity

The newest audio offering from DALI is a sub/sat package that's small but makes [Ed Selley](#) feel all grown up.



Each Fazon Mikro employs a soft dome tweeter and wood fibre midbass driver

WHILE DANISH BRAND DALI offers a varied speaker range across the worlds of home cinema and hi-fi, its products share design characteristics at all price points. The most obvious is the use of wood fibre drivers, which differ from more conventional paper cones thanks to the use of longer untreated fibres in the composition to add to the overall strength. These are then partnered with a soft dome tweeter – sometimes augmented by a ribbon unit as well – in different sizes with varying degrees of sophistication in all DALI lines.

The FAZON MIKRO system, while therefore looking a little different to more conventional

DALI speakers, continues this trait. Sure enough, the wood fibre driver and soft dome tweeter are present and correct – in this case a 4in midbass driver and a 20mm high-frequency driver.

Yet the FAZON differs somewhat from other sub/sat designs. The Fazon Micro is sold in pairs as a speaker in its own right and although it is a decidedly tiny 19.6 centimetres tall, it is very clearly a shrunken two way standmount rather than a truly titchy satellite speaker.

Instead of a conventional MDF cabinet, the FAZON MIKRO is made from aluminium. This has a number of advantages in that the thinner walls maximise internal capacity while

providing a strong enclosure that can be made in a shape that helps to reduce standing waves.

This two-piece chassis is relatively conventional in appearance but elegant nonetheless. The system comprises four of the Mikro speakers with a single Mikro Vocal speaker acting as a centre. This is identical in terms of layout and design to the Mikro but is arranged in landscape rather than portrait and has a small foot to keep it sat where you want.

All five speakers are sealer cabinet designs with the ability to wall mount on a keyhole mount as well as a dedicated Dali floorstand. A single pair of terminals is fitted which are the

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Upper mid-range
5.1 sub/sat
speaker system

POSITION:

Part of the FAZON
range of style
speakers – below
the larger F5

PEERS:

KEF E305;
Monitor Audio MASS;
Cabasse Eole 3





The EF-9 subwoofer uses a 170W Class D amplifier and a 9in aluminium LF driver

spring loaded post type that make bare wire connection very simple and – unusually for this type of connection – would probably accept a banana plug with good luck and a following wind.

The subwoofer in this instance is the all new E-9 F which rather than being specifically designed for the Fazon range is one of a group of subwoofers designed to partner with a variety of speakers depending on the size of the room and how hard you want your organs rattled. To this end, the E-9 F eschews a name that sounds like a raygun and instead takes its name from the size from A–Z (with A being smallest), the driver size (9 inches) and the configuration (forward firing). The sub makes use of a 170W class D amplifier and Dali claims a modest extension of 35Hz at +/- 3dB.

The resulting system lacks the swoopy otherworldliness of the KEF E305 system or the Cabasse Eole 3 but it is handsome and subtle looking collection of units nonetheless. The build quality is excellent with a high quality paint finish on the satellites and neat touches like the grilles being held in place by the curvature of the chassis. The black review samples with chrome detailing are a happy match to most TVs on sale as well. The sub is more prosaic but is also well built and has some nice touches like the Dali logo embossed on the driver.

Seamless synergy

Connected to a Cambridge Audio 751R, the Dali shows promise from the outset. As the Fazon Mikro is sold as a separate stereo loudspeaker, Dali has ensured that although it is hardly a bass monster, it has a frequency response that dips to 95Hz which allows for a crossover to be set at the point where the E-9 F just about becomes omnidirectional. This lends the Dali a sense of effortlessness that is often missing when the crossover has to be set higher than this. This is vital in terms of making the Dali sound big and spacious. The

intellectually vacant but cheerfully silly Pacific Rim is replayed with impressive confidence and genuine scale.

The soundstage never feels constrained and even though the subwoofer is not an absolute bass monster, it never feels underpowered and explosions (of which there many) are well handled if lacking the absolute gut shaking extension of some larger designs. The more refined requirements of Apollo 13 are also met with some style and the Dali is able to generate weight and scale in the lower midrange which can sometimes be lacking in sub sat packages. The perception seems to be that the Dali doesn't go overboard at the frequency extremes to better serve the bit that matters.

The trademark Dali drivers deliver excellent detail and tonality and voices in particular are handled with an assurance that lends realism and believability to the performance. The Mikros are able to run at high levels without tipping over into harshness or aggression although this smoothness can rob them of the last ounce of excitement compared to some of the metal domed competition. With identical drivers all round, the handover from speaker to speaker is impressively seamless and the front three speakers in particular combine to form a very convincing arc of sound. The actual dispersion from the Fazons is not as wide as some of its rivals but they integrate so well together that in all but the largest rooms, the effect will be hard to spot.

The Dalis also make a convincing stab at music reproduction too. The 100Hz crossover and the agility of the E-9 F mean that the effect is of two well integrated speakers rather than three. The big analogue notes of The Hidden Orchestra's Archipelago are well handled and the decision that Dali seems to have taken to trade off the absolute extension that might be possible from a sub of this size in order to keep it agile and detailed and the result is a system that hangs together better than many of its rivals. Pushed to serious levels with more aggressive music and the E-9 F can become more obtrusive but it does so commendably gracefully.

The Fazon Mikro is an impressively assured speaker package that puts in a consistently controlled and immersive performance with movies and music. There are other packages that can generate a more superficially exciting performance and there are ones that can dig a little deeper but the way that the Dali goes about handling pretty much any type of film or music you can throw at them in a way that is exciting and refined enough to ensure that you can use them for hours at a time without them coming across as bright or fatiguing. When you consider the excellent build, handsome appearance and flexible installation and you have a package that is likely to win itself a lot of friends ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DALI FAZON MIKRO

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in wood fibre midbass driver; 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 95Hz–25kHz
SENSITIVITY: 84dB
POWER HANDLING: 120W
DIMENSIONS: 113(w) x 196(h) x 96(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.5kg

FAZON MIKRO VOKAL

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in wood fibre midbass driver; 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 95Hz–25kHz
SENSITIVITY: 84dB
POWER HANDLING: 120W
DIMENSIONS: 196(w) x 96(h) x 113(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.5kg

E-9 F SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 9in aluminium bass driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 35–190Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 175W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 287(w) x 307(h) x 310(d)mm
WEIGHT: 11.8kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono and separate LFE input

HCC VERDICT



DALI FAZON MIKRO 5.1

→ £1,100 Approx → www.dali-speakers.com
 → Tel: 0845 644 35 37

HIGHS: Powerful, refined and detailed sound; excellent build and flexible placement
LOWS: Not a bass monster or the most out-and-out exciting sub/sat package around

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Return of the Radius

Taking aim at the high-end sub/sat market, Monitor Audio has overhauled its much-loved Radius range. **Danny Phillips** tries, and fails, to find something to complain about

MONITOR AUDIO'S RADIUS range has already proved a firm favourite thanks to its living room-friendly looks and spine-tingling sound quality. Yet the British brand isn't resting on its laurels, recently updating the product stable with a crop of new designs.

This 5.1 package brings together some of these new additions, including a reboot of the Radius 90 compact speaker (here on front and surround duties) and the brand-new Radius 200 centre speaker. Providing the low-end grunt is the Radius 390, the pricier of two freshly-minted subwoofers.

Monitor Audio has styled every speaker in this system with effortless panache. The gleaming gloss-white finish that adorns our sample is pure disco, but the swanky black version is equally dapper.

Each speaker is a solid, impenetrable box with no joins or seams aside from the grooved HiVe II port on the back, which appears for the first time on the Radius range. This, says Monitor Audio, accelerates the flow of air and reduces turbulence for a more dynamic bass response, having the same effect on airflow as a gun barrel on a bullet.

Sub/sat royalty

Pick up the Radius 90 and its heft is satisfying. You'll feel like you've got your money's worth before you've even listened to it – important, as this array's £1,500 ticket is at the upper limit of most people's sub/sat budget. Lending extra stability from the inside is a single through-bolt driver fixing that braces the cabinet. The Radius 90 stands just shy of 20cm tall, making it a small, unobtrusive addition to your room. It can be mounted on Monitor Audio's optional stands or on your wall using single-point fixing. For tabletop placement there are adhesive pads in the box.

The drivers are a new 4in C-CAM (ceramic-coated aluminium/magnesium) bass driver – filtered down from the brand's Platinum and Gold GX ranges – and a 1in rear-vented tweeter, which is made from C-CAM for the first time. The Radius 200 centre channel uses a pair of bass drivers, sandwiching a tweeter.

Design-wise, the Radius 390 subwoofer is probably the best of the bunch. A neat cube of burly, internally-braced MDF, it's quite compact (making placement easier) and both

its side-firing 10in C-CAM drivers – one active, one auxiliary bass radiator – match the finish. It's powered by a 200W Class D amplifier, and on the back is an array controls to get it singing in harmony with the speakers – a low-pass filter switch for LFE or stereo input selection, a phase switch and dials to adjust the volume and crossover frequency. A 12V trigger input allows system automation.

There's also a switch allowing you to choose between three different bass modes

– Music, Movie and Impact. Movie provides a flat response down to 35Hz; Music mode dips further to 30Hz at -2dB lower; while Impact mode delves down to 40Hz but offers a +3dB boost.

Let loose with the brutal action of *Pacific Rim* on Blu-ray, the R90HT1 proves very accomplished. With towering Jaegers and Kaiju stomping through cities and oceans, this is a movie that demands impact and scale – something this system achieves without



batting an eyelid. Quite a feat for speakers barely as tall as my AV receiver.

The Monitor Audios take great delight in driving the thunderous battle sequences into the room. When *Crimson Typhoon* squares up to *Otachi* and *Leatherback*, the clatter of the robot's metal armour and the beast's rasping roars boast remarkable attack and aggression, without sounding bright or synthetic. Furthermore, these little speakers display the sort of slam and dynamism you'd expect from larger designs, hitting that sweet spot between excitement and refinement that leaves you feeling entertained but not violated.

The subwoofer plays a part here, of course; it pummels the room with authoritative bass notes delivered with supreme depth and grip. So when the lobster-like *Onibaba* lumbers through Tokyo, the footsteps evoke terror. It rumbles away happily during quieter scenes too, lending subtle atmosphere and warmth to voices and background music. I found it most impressive in 'Movie' mode. 'Impact' mode does what it says on the tin but pushes

low frequencies too hard. With the former, the 390 forms a tight union with the satellites, resulting in a cohesive soundfield, and one backed up by the sort of snappy steering that Sebastian Vettel would be proud of.

Away from barnstorming action, the Radius system has a sideline in poise and insight. *Pacific Rim*'s shots of crowded streets in Hong Kong's Bone Slums are alive with the sounds of hissing rain, beeping rickshaws and chattering voices, delicately scattered around the spacious soundstage like audio confetti. Idris Elba's nonsense dialogue, meanwhile, is imbued with an almost life-like presence by the Radius 200, with the dual midbass drivers underpinning his gruff English tones.

And with music material, it's equally good. Whether pounding out the funky basslines of an *Earth Wind and Fire* track or teasing the darkly mellifluous tones of Gretchen Parlato's *Henya*, the R90HT1 demonstrates outstanding timing, agility and detail retrieval.

One of the best compact 5.1 systems money can buy? Certainly ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 5.1-channel compact speaker package

POSITION: Sits above the MASS system but below Apex

PEERS: Wharfedale Diamond 100-HCP; Cambridge Audio Aero; DALI FAZON MIKRO

SPECIFICATIONS

RADIUS 90 STANDMOUNT

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in C-CAM bass/mid driver; 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter

ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex, rear-ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-35kHz

SENSITIVITY: 83dB

POWER HANDLING: 75W

DIMENSIONS: 125(w) x 198(h) x 140(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.1kg

RADIUS 200 CENTRE

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4in C-CAM bass/mid drivers; 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter

ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex, rear-ported

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 60Hz-35kHz

SENSITIVITY: 86dB

POWER HANDLING: 100W

DIMENSIONS: 330(w) x 125(h) x 140(d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.6kg

RADIUS 390 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in C-CAM long-throw cone driver; 1 x 10in auxiliary bass radiator

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 30Hz-120Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 200W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 330(w) x 348(h) x 345(d)mm

WEIGHT: 13.76kg

CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono inputs; LFE input; 12V trigger in



HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio R90HT1

→ £1,500 Approx → www.monitoraudio.co.uk
→ Tel: 01268 740580

HIGHS: Seamless, coherent soundstage; wonderful detail reproduction; superb bass grip and slam; stunning design

LOWS: Subwoofer Impact mode too imposing; cheaper sub/sat packages are available

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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65in 4K TV shootout

With the Big Six TV brands all now offering 4K flatscreens, **John Archer** finds out which is best



LG 65LA970W

LG's first 'regular-sized' 4K TV following its debut 84in beast

PANASONIC TX-L65WT600

DisplayPort and HDMI 2.0 inputs make this TV futureproof

PHILIPS 65PFL9708S

Ambilight tech should aid the immersive nature of UHD visuals

SAMSUNG UE65F9000

Does the world's biggest TV brand lead the way with 4K?

SONY KDL-65X9005A

An eye-catching bigscreen with side-mounted speaker drivers

TOSHIBA 65L9363

CEVO-powered upscaling wants to buff up your Blu-rays

Served with a soundbar

LG follows its 84in 4K debut with a 65-incher that has an audio trick up its sleeve

SOUND ON TAP

LG's screen incorporates a drop-down speaker bar



LG'S 65LA970W HAS some pleasant surprises up its sleeve – starting with the fact that having initially launched at £5,500, it's now available for just £4,500, undercutting many of its rivals. Its design, too, is delicious, thanks to its physics-defyingly slim bezel, striking full-width open metal stand and a deeply groovy hydraulic speaker bar (with a quartet of drivers) that slides out of the TV's body when you turn the set on.

While the motorised nature of this speaker bar is ultimately questionable in its necessity, we certainly applaud the idea of incorporating front-firing speakers into such a premium set.

The 65LA970W's connections include three USBs and Ethernet/integrated Wi-Fi network options for accessing multimedia stored on networked DLNA computers and LG's online platform. There are only three HDMI inputs though, none of which are built to the new HDMI 2.0 spec required for full colour-bandwidth 4K sources at anything higher than 30fps. What's more, LG was infuriatingly obtuse when we repeatedly tried to pin it down on whether it will join other brands in offering a future firmware update to enable 4K HDMI playback above 30fps. Hmm.

Getting back to good news, the 65LA970W carries LG's content-rich smart TV platform, and supports the inspired point-and-click Magic Remote control system. Uniquely in the 65in 4K TV world, LG uses a direct (rather than edge) LED lighting system.

This range-topping screen provides instantly gratifying results in the form of

arguably the finest native 4K pictures seen to date. The detail resolved from 4K demo footage is just stunning, making me wonder if people still claiming you don't appreciate the 4K difference on 65in screens actually have eyes.

The now-familiar sense of extra depth and subtle colour rendering is also there in 4K images along with the extra detail – and the sheer clarity with which the 65LA970W delivers these benefits is exquisite.

Unfortunately, though, we don't yet live in a 4K AV world, and switching to Blu-ray sources like *Pacific Rim* and the tricky-to-handle *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows Part 2* reveals that while the 65LA970W's upscaling isn't bad, it's not up there with the systems of some of its rivals.

LG's processing appears more of an all-round sharpening tool that treats images on a fairly uniform basis, while Samsung and Sony in particular seem cleverer at adapting their scaling to different content types. This means LG's upscaling can cause slightly more noise at times, especially with anything less than pristine HD content.

The 65LA970W hits its stride again with passive 3D, rendering *Pacific Rim*'s SFX porn with terrific clarity, superbly rich colours and none of the flickering and crosstalk issues (so long as you keep your vertical viewing angle below 13 degrees) associated with active 3D.

There are, though, two general picture concerns. Firstly, black levels don't initially look as good as you'd expect of a direct LED TV

– though you can hugely improve this situation by setting the local dimming and dynamic backlight features to low and reducing the set's backlight output to its 40-45 level.

The other issue is some vertical banding visible during camera pans across bright backdrops. This problem shouldn't crop up badly all that often – unless you're a heavy-duty sports viewer.

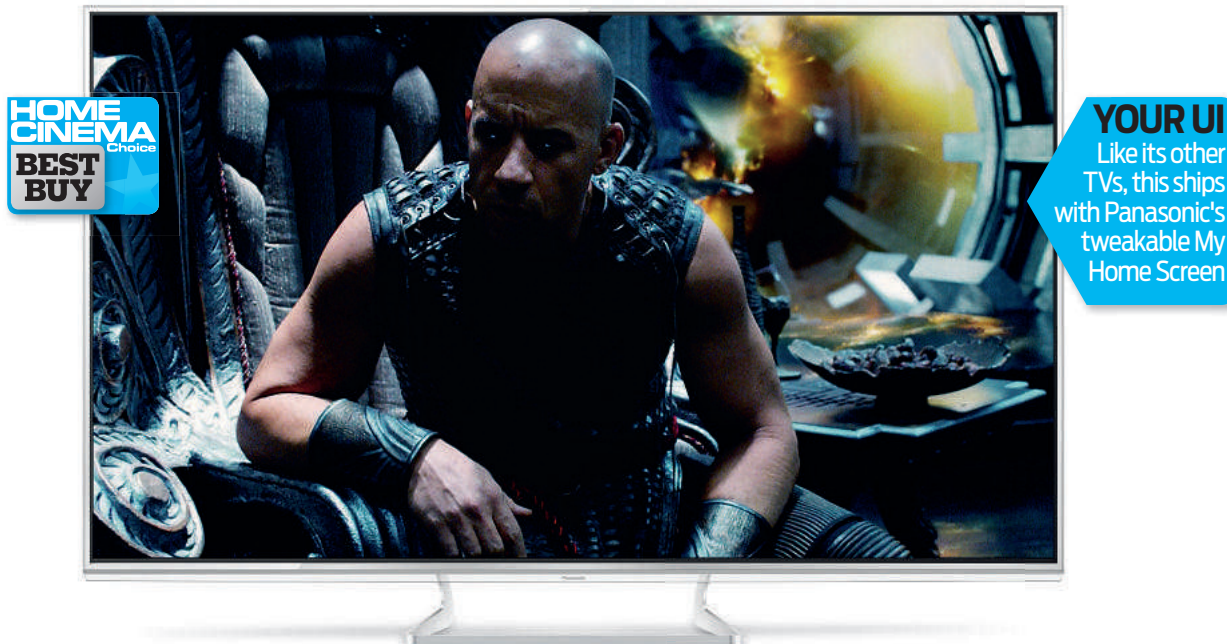
Joining the 65LA970W's mostly impressive pictures are some excellent sonics. The innovative soundbar delivers terrific attack and dynamic range, and there's none of the dialogue-muffling that characterises the majority of flat TVs. It doesn't sound quite as 'hi-fi' as the magnetic fluid speaker array in Sony's X9005A models, but it's a great effort.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; 3 x USB; CI slot; tuner jack; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; PC audio input; RS-232; headphone jack; Ethernet; component video
SOUND: 5 x 10W (4.1 speaker bar configuration)
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,451(w) x 838(h) x 40.8(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 40.6kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Magic remote; online service including many video streaming services; 1000 Motion Clarity Index; timeshifting to external DVR; built-in camera

The king of connectivity

Worried about the changing face of the HDMI specification? Worry no more



LET'S CUT STRAIGHT to the chase with this one. Tucked away on the L65WT600's rear is the world's first HDMI 2.0 port, meaning that Panasonic's 4K LCD TV is currently unique in being able to handle enough data to deliver 4K at 50/60Hz with 12-bit, full 4:4:4 colour subsampling. In fact, it even includes an unusual (in the TV world) DisplayPort 4K connection as an alternative to the HDMI 2.0 jack. The HDMI's on other 4K TVs currently only take 4K at higher than 30fps if they compromise on their colour performance. So it's fair to say the L65WT600 has got off to a serious head start – some may consider it reason enough to put this telly on the top of their wishlist.

This futuristic connectivity is joined by a futuristic design – it's a vision in gleaming metal and glass. And lurking within this debonair frame is some advanced tech beyond the native 4K resolution and HDMI 2.0 port. The edge LED lighting array is equipped with local dimming to boost contrast, while picture calibration tools are so numerous that the TV has been endorsed by the independent Imaging Science Foundation (ISF) professional calibration group. The L65WT600 is also the first 4K LCD TV to achieve certification from THX.

Panasonic's screen claims a motion performance of 2,000Hz – created via a native 100Hz panel combined with advanced backlight scanning and frame interpolation – and is equipped with an active 3D system (two pairs of glasses are included free).

Smart TV features are headed up by the excellent, uniquely customisable My Home Screen interface, but more of the main video streaming services would be appreciated.

Panasonic supplied a PC loaded with 60Hz 4K content so we could test out the HDMI 2.0 and DisplayPort connections. Seeing 4K running at such a high frame-rate is exhilarating, as the extra motion clarity you get from having more frames of image data means you get a much more consistent 4K 'feel' to pictures, especially during action scenes. Not that the L65WT600 doesn't also look great with normal sub-30fps 4K. Detailing is fantastic; colours look vivid, entirely credible and almost infinitely subtle; the sense of depth with shots containing extreme depth of field goes way beyond anything possible with normal HD; and there's an extra sense of density to the visuals that really draws you in.

The L65WT600 is a strong HD upscaler, too. It's very clever about treating noise and grain differently to other elements of the image, leaving you with a denser, sharper picture that still looks clean.

3D Blu-rays, displayed at upscaled 4K via Panasonic's active engine, also dazzle, adding image density in a way that suits 3D perfectly without causing unwanted side effects. The extra clarity is left largely untroubled by crosstalk ghosting noise or excessive motion judder. Basically, if this is what 4K 3D can look like, we'll take it.

There are, though, two picture flaws that undermine some of the L65WT600's prowess.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD; Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI (one 2.0); DisplayPort; 3 x USB; CI slot; tuner jack; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; PC audio input; headphone jack; Ethernet; SD card; component video
SOUND: 18W (4W + 4W + 10W)
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,468(w) x 863(h) x 56(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 38kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; trackpad remote; Smart portal including some video streaming services; 2,000Hz Back Light Scanning; timeshifting to external DVR; upscaling modes; built-in camera; My Home Screen interface

There's some trace of vertical banding down the picture, similar to that seen with the LG screen but slightly more distinct. It isn't always visible, but it crops up during camera pans, especially over bright, fairly uniform material like football pitches.

The other issue is contrast. The Panasonic's native contrast is only fair to middling, yet if you use the provided dynamic contrast and local dimming controls to boost black levels they can, respectively, cause brightness instability and light 'blocking' around bright objects. I wasn't able to arrive at a selection of settings that I felt 100 per cent satisfied with when watching dark scenes. There are other LED-lit TVs that better it in this department. ➤

Pulsating with power

Philips' 4K set features Mensa-grade processing – but does that mean it's the smart choice?

HOOKUP HEAVEN

The Philips offers five HDMI inputs – good news for source junkies



ALTHOUGH LG'S RECENT price cut (and a similar one by Toshiba) means the Philips 65PFL9708 is no longer the only £4,500 4K TV in town, it's still very good value for what's on offer. The appeal starts with its looks. The slightly drab dark frame can be illuminated – literally – by Philips' Ambilight system, which uses LEDs on the TV's rear to fire out pools of coloured light that can match (with startling tonal and local accuracy) the colour content of the pictures you're watching.

The 65PFL9708's connections are almost outstanding too, thanks to the inclusion of five HDMI, plus built-in Wi-Fi and plenty of USB ports. The only catch is that none of the HDMI are built to the 2.0 standard. One does, however, feed into a bespoke 4K-friendly processing board, and Philips is promising an external box at some unspecified date that will make 50Hz/60Hz 4K via HDMI possible.

The edge LED 4K panel at the 65PFL9708's heart is driven by a new Ultra Pixel HD video processing engine that Philips reckons can handle 4 billion pixels a second. There's no local dimming, but you do get a 'macro dimming' system that divides the picture into small sections for more effective analysis.

Part of the Ultra Pixel HD engine is aimed at reducing LCD's motion blur and judder problems, which is handy given that such issues can be exacerbated by 4K's clarity. Processing haters, though, should note that Philips has provided the tools to adjust almost every aspect of its processing engine (if you can be bothered...).

Inevitably, there's a Smart TV system on the 65PFL9708, yet unfortunately this is left looking pretty threadbare by some of the rival platforms. Unless you're a fan of adult material, that is.

Native 4K pictures look predictably excellent. Colours are particularly effective, with ultra-potent saturations and lush blends. While the performance isn't quite as crisp and detailed as on some rival screens, you can activate the TV's sharpness-boosting Ultra Resolution tool. This tool only occasionally creates niggly side effects, so there's no real harm in leaving it switched permanently on.

Motion clarity with 4K sources is credible. The powerful motion processing removes almost all blur and judder without – if you stick with its lowest setting, anyway – leaving pictures feeling over-processed. This onboard processing grunt is mostly useful when it comes to upscaling too, helping the TV add a perceivable amount of detail and sharpness to HD pictures. However, as with LG's 65LA970W, there are times – such as during Harry's chat with the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw on the grainy Blu-ray of *The Deathly Hallows Pt 2* – that Philips' upscaling engine feels quite rigid in its approach. Either that or the processing generally comes on too strong.

Feeding the Philips a 3D platter yields generally positive results. The passive 3D technology means stereoscopic images are free of crosstalk ghosting and flicker, leaving you to bask in the Full HD images (as opposed to the reduced-resolution visuals of a normal

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 5 x HDMI; 3 x USB; CI slot; tuner jack; Scart; optical digital audio output; PC input; headphone jack; Ethernet; component video
SOUND: 27W (15W + 2 x 6W)
BRIGHTNESS: 450cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,467(w) x 855(h) x 45.5 (d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 37.5kg
FEATURES: Wi-Fi onboard; QWERTY keyboard on remote; online service; 900Hz PMR, timeshifting to external DVR; built-in camera; Ambilight 3-sided XL; wall colour adaptive; Hex Core processing; two-player full-screen gaming

passive display) that the 4K resolution makes possible.

These 3D pictures look bright and vivid, too, and detail levels are engagingly high. The only negative is that motion can suffer fairly aggressive judder without the Natural Motion circuitry engaged – but there's some obvious flickering and object haloing if you do use Natural Motion.

Joining the 65PFL9708's handsome 4K images is a handsome audio performance, given added oomph by rear-mounted bass drivers and tweeters capable of presenting high-frequency details without sounding harsh. It's not as stellar as the audio of Sony's 65X9005A, but Philips has achieved its potent sound from a slimmer TV frame.

The popular choice

Samsung is the UK's favourite TV brand – but does it also make our favourite 4K TV?



ACCORDING TO RECENT figures, Samsung has already bagged more than 60 per cent of the 4K TV market in Britain and Switzerland. All those buyers probably haven't been swayed by the aesthetics of the Series 9 models; the UE65F9000 is nice, rather than as jaw-droppingly attractive as some of its shelf-mates. Sporting a grey finish, there's nothing especially outstanding about its sculpting or slinness.

Most of the UE65F9000's connections are found on an external switchbox that attaches to the TV via a single proprietary cable. This will no doubt be appreciated by anyone seeking to wall-hang the TV, but its importance goes way further than that. By externalising the sockets, Samsung provides a potential way of adding HDMI 2.0 inputs to the UE65F9000 via a future switchbox.

The UE65F9000 benefits from one of Samsung's home-grown, newly-developed edge LED panel designs, and unlike Samsung's premium Full HD TVs it offers a local dimming system to boost contrast. This is a mouthwatering prospect given how good Samsung's contrast has been recently even without local dimming.

The UE65F9000 hasn't sought ISF or THX backing, but it's still emphatically well stocked with calibration tools. And technophobes may be happy to hear that some of the picture modes are very well considered, which isn't generally the case with Samsung presets.

The UE65F9000 provides 3D using the active system, upscaling 3D Blu-rays to its

3,840 x 2,160 resolution, and stocks what's currently the most sophisticated Smart TV system in town. An accomplished programme recommendations system based on an analysis of your viewing habits, a snazzy multi-screen hub and a huge roster of video streaming options, are among the highlights of Samsung's net-connected portal.

In action, the UE65F9000 quickly proves an outstandingly good 4K TV. Native 4K images look astonishing, with gorgeous levels of detail, a huge sense of depth, and colours that combine extreme vibrancy with remarkable subtlety in a way only 4K can.

These sorts of things are true of all 4K TVs to some extent, but there seems a touch more snap to Samsung's native 4K images – especially as its motion handling and contrast range both help enhance the benefits that having so many pixels can bring.

Where the UE65F9000 really stands out from the 4K crowd, though, is with its upscaled HD pictures. Huge amounts of texture, detail and pixel density are bestowed upon Full HD material without emphasising source noise. In fact, it delivers the sharpest, crispest, most 4K-looking visuals in this high-powered group test. You can cause some noise and haloing issues if you leave the Samsung's sharpness setting much higher than its '20' level, but with that taken care of you'll be amazed at how much better-looking the UE65F9000 makes your BD collection.

3D performance is similarly exemplary. Again, the quality of the screen's upscaling is

sensationally apparent, as the TV conjures up an incredible amount of extra detail, bringing *Pacific Rim*'s retconned 3D locations to life with all the sharpness of *Crimson Typhoon*'s claws. Guillermo del Toro's sci-fi world looks more realistic, the sense of 3D space is more pronounced, and the whole image is insanely absorbing.

The only real weak side to the UE65F9000's performance is its sound. The speakers, while more powerful than those of most Samsung tellies (the brand claims 70W of power), are just less expressive and punchy than much of the 4K competition. So even for casual viewing I'd still suggest cranking up your AV amp and speakers.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD; Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; CI slot; tuner jack; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; PC input; headphone jack; Ethernet; component video
SOUND: 70W (15W x 2 + 20W x 2)
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,462.3(w) x 837.8(h) x 40.7(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 32.1kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; second trackpad remote; online service including class-leading range of video streaming services; 1000Hz CMR; timeshifting to external DVR; built-in camera, S-Recommendation system; gesture and voice control support

Meet the 4K wideboy

Sony's 65-incher offers side-mounted speakers – but there's more here than just good sonics

THE X FACTOR

Sony's X-Reality Pro engine is used to upscale SD and HD to 4K



NO MATTER HOW many times we look at it, we still struggle to take in the sheer massiveness of Sony's first 65in 4K TV. As well as its huge screen, it requires your living room to accommodate two 'wings' containing an array of six speakers – four main drivers and two tweeters.

While some may worry about coping with these few extra inches, for us its size doesn't stop it looking very pretty – especially when you add in its glassy black finish.

The set's rear plays host to a standard suite of connections, including four HDMI's, three USBs and the usual Wi-Fi and Ethernet options. None of the HDMI's on the 65X9005A are HDMI 2.0, but Sony has formally announced that the HDMI's will be updatable to handle 4K with 50/60Hz frame rates, albeit at a reduced colour resolution. In fact, this update has already rolled out in Japan.

The 65X9005A enjoys the brand's latest Smart portal, complete with a fairly satisfying suite of video streaming services but hindered slightly by a rather cumbersome interface.

Delivering the 65X9005A's pictures is an edge LED lighting system, accompanied by Sony's superb local dimming engine.

Also significant on the spec sheet is Triluminos technology: a quantum dot system that produces a wider colour range compared with the normal LED filter approach. This could prove very helpful in delivering even more subtlety from 4K sources.

Feeding the 65X9005A a selection of 4K demo material draws instantly spectacular

results, as the content looks exquisite – almost painterly – in its precision and density. To be more specific, while its 3,840 x 2,160 pictures perhaps don't quite look as eye-slicing sharp as those of the Samsung UE65F9000, its colours appear even more subtle and expressive than those of its Korean competitor, while also enjoying incredibly vivid saturations.

A similar story becomes apparent when turning to upscaled HD. While Sony's pipped image isn't quite as crisp as Samsung's, it's beautifully natural and the way it adjusts its approach relative to not only the different qualities of different incoming sources but even local image differences within a single frame is rather clever. Plus, again, the Triluminos system provides more colour finesse.

Sony's X-Reality Pro processing is even good enough to do a watchable job of upscaling standard-definition and video streamed from the internet – something which some rivals in this roundup struggle with.

If you've lost faith in 3D, meanwhile, the 65X9005A could restore your interest. The combination of its crosstalk- and flicker-free passive 3D system, the beyond-HD horizontal resolution and its screen size delivers an immaculate, non-fatiguing 3D experience that made *Pacific Rim* a hoot. Notwithstanding all the corny dialogue and hokey story, anyway...

3D is enhanced, moreover, by the Sony's outstanding contrast performance – the Big

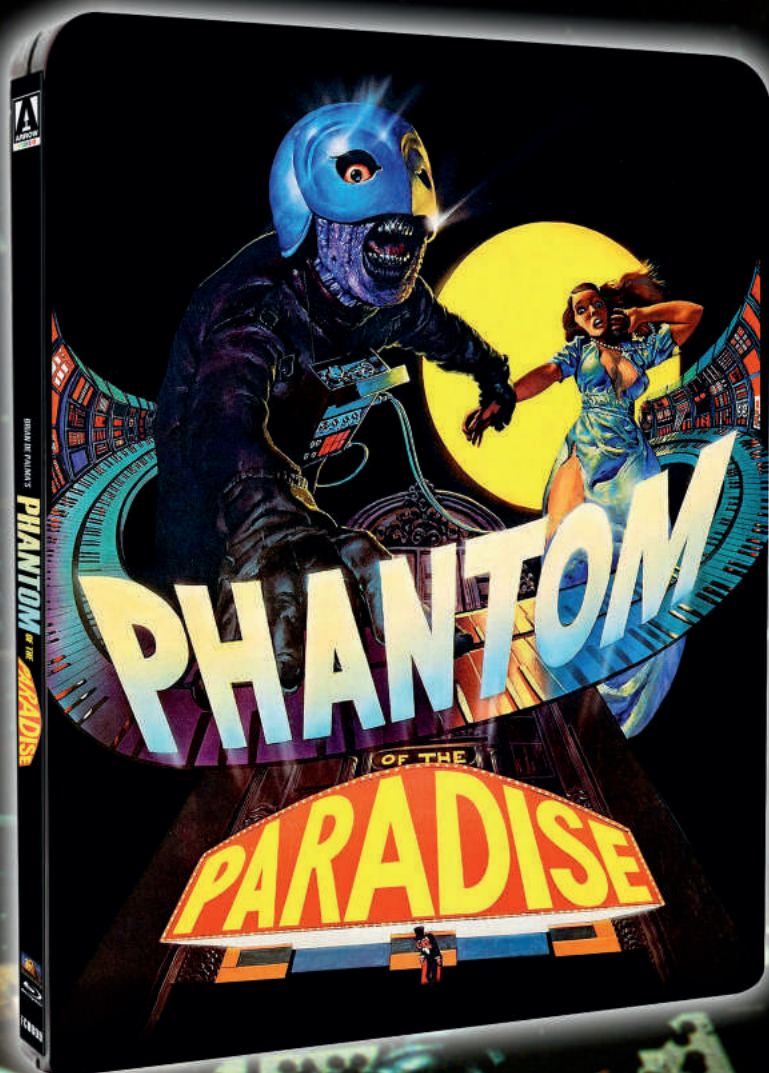
S's local dimming system again proves to be ahead of the rest – and, once again, the colour finesse afforded by the Triluminos system.

As if its good pictures weren't already attraction enough, those massive, front-firing speakers – made using Sony's magnetic fluid technology that works to produce a fuller sound from small enclosures – deliver probably the best sound quality we've ever heard from an integrated TV audio system (Bose's TV with a subwoofer in its rear excepted). Bass levels are excellent and the mid-range is remarkably open and wide, giving it plenty of room to expand to handle action scenes. Treble detailing is delivered without a hint of harshness.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; CI slot; tuner jack; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite video; headphone jack; Ethernet; component video
SOUND: 65W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: Over 1 million:1
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,682(w) x 875(h) x 100(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 45kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; second NFC mini remote; online service including good amount of video streaming services; Motionflow XR 800; timeshifting to external DVR; X-Reality Pro processing; Triluminos LED backlighting technology; local dimming

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Blending in to the crowd

Toshiba's first-gen 4K screen performs well, but is in need of a killer app

PASSIVE PASSION

Toshiba bundles four pairs of passive spex for 3D fans to don



THE 65L9363 IS the second TV in this group test to have slashed its price from an initial £5,500 to just £4,500 within mere weeks of launching. The 4K price war is already afoot, it would seem.

Even with its cheaper price in mind, though, it's hard to find anything about its feature list or appearance that might help it stand out from the 4K crowd.

Aesthetically it's hit and miss. While its frame is admirably slim, the overall build quality feels a touch cheap. Connections are solid with four HDMI, two USBs, SD card, Wi-Fi and DLNA options – although, again, the HDMI are not built to the 2.0 standard, and so in their current form can only take 4K at 30Hz or less. Toshiba assures us, though, that a firmware update will enable 4K at 50/60Hz via HDMI, albeit with reduced colour resolution.

The network jacks support the usual DLNA streaming and online services, the latter of which are represented by Toshiba's Cloud TV platform. This does some interesting things: there's a Twitter feed based on the three most trending current broadcasts; a selection of onscreen avatars recommending different content from the upcoming schedules; and an app for surfing the TV's listings on phones and tablets. However, Cloud TV is ultimately hamstrung by a severe lack of content, especially when it comes to video streaming.

The 65L9363 uses an edge LED engine, but there's no local dimming and, seemingly, no micro dimming of the sort used by the Philips set. You do get a passive 3D playback

system (with four pairs of glasses), but really the only interesting thing on the 65L9363's feature list is its 'CEVO Engine 4K' picture processing engine. This has yielded highly positive results on past Toshiba TVs, so should be well positioned to handle the demands of 4K upscaling.

The screen's native 4K pictures look lovely. The TV has easily enough quality to deliver the format's enhanced crispness, detail, density, colour accuracy and depth. Its colours, in particular, are excellent, coming second only to those of Sony's 65X9005A in their vibrancy and subtlety.

There's a little motion blur if you don't use the provided 800Hz-like motion processing, but the CEVO engine is powerful enough to enable the use of this processing without the image looking too unnatural.

There's just one problem with the 65L9363's native 4K playback: a tendency for shadowy details to get crushed out of dark pictures, reducing the sense of depth and 4K detail versus what you see with bright material. Dark scenes also reveal a rather average general contrast performance relative to the excellent black levels produced by some of its rival screens.

The 65L9363 also falls short of its best rivals with its HD upscaling. There's nothing bad about it; in fact it's quite good at keeping a lid on noise. However, upscaled pictures look noticeably softer – and thus less 4K – than they do on all of the other TVs featured in this next-gen shootout.

The 65L9363 is on much more confident ground with 3D, as the passive 3D engine reproduces 3D Blu-rays with superb detailing, rich colour intensity, a strong sense of depth during bright scenes, and surprisingly good motion handling given that some of Toshiba's non-4K sets have struggled with fast-paced stereoscopy.

Toshiba has somehow eked a quite potent audio performance out of the 65L9363's slender frame, with plenty of bass, extreme volume potential and a broad mid-range. Trebles can be a touch harsh, though, and the set's ambitions outweigh its abilities in that if you try and use it at anywhere near its highest volume it starts to distort and 'phut' quite heavily.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive
ULTRA HD: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNER: Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 2 x USB; CI slot; tuner jack; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; PC input; headphone jack; Ethernet; SD card; RS232; component video
SOUND: 2 x 20W
BRIGHTNESS: 450cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO: 4,000:1 (native)
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,463(w) x 849(h) x 71(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 44.7kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; AMR 800 processing; CEVO Engine 4K processing, swivel stand; Cloud TV system with Twitter integration; MediaGuide tablet/phone listings app; timeshifting to external USB HDD

Final standings

IF YOU THINK you don't need 4K in your life, then you should grab a demo of any of these six screens to see what those extra pixels can do for your pictures – even with 4K content being practically nonexistent. The best of the models here upscale current HD material to their screen's native 4K resolutions with dazzling efficiency. And at 65in, you'll adore the difference.

If you don't already own a 4K display, then every model featured here will provide a genuine step forward to what you're watching right now. Choosing between them has almost felt like nitpicking. But we've done our best, and here are the results.

Bringing up the rear is the Toshiba. This doesn't offer anything more than its rivals, and its slightly soft upscaled pictures, slightly average contrast and malnourished Smart TV service count against it. In fifth place comes the LG. This seems harsh, given that it arguably produces the single best native 4K picture here, and has recently received a £1,000 price cut. However, we're concerned by LG's refusal to categorically confirm that its HDMI inputs can be upgraded to accept 50/60Hz 4K, and its banding issue was thrown into sharp relief

by the fact that most other TVs in the group test don't suffer the same problem.

In third is the Philips. This is a grand cheaper than the third-placed Panasonic, and offers a better contrast performance. Yet the Panasonic has that future-proof HDMI 2.0 port and – aside from its slight contrast issues – delivers outstanding pictures with both native 4K and upscaled content. Indeed, it outguns the Philips with the latter.

Tied for first are Sony and Samsung. We consider both TVs equally great, but there are differences that may sway your personal choice. Sony's has better colours, slightly more natural contrast handling, and a class-leading speaker system, while the Samsung looks slightly sharper with 4K and upscaled content, and offers a better online service.

Samsung and Sony's 65in 4K screens are hard to separate



HCC VERDICT



LG 65LA970W

→ £4,500 Approx → www.lg.com/uk → Tel: 0844 847 5454

HIGHS: Brilliant native 4K pictures; soundbar audio system; decent value

LOWS: Upscaling is a little single-minded; banding artefact during camera pans

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic TX-L65WT600

→ £5,400 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk → Tel: 0844 844 3852

HIGHS: Gorgeous design; My Home Screen interface; currently unique HDMI 2.0 support; picture quality

LOWS: Banding during camera pans; some contrast shortcomings; pricey

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Philips 65PFL9708

→ £4,500 Approx → www.philips.com → Tel: 0844 338 0488

HIGHS: Good value; strong native 4K and upscaling; Ambilight

LOWS: Upscaling processing occasionally too strong; 3D motion issues; complex to setup

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE65F9000

→ £5,000 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk → Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Sharp native 4K and upscaled pictures; great 3D performance; jack box offers potential upgrades

LOWS: Average sound; needs a little care with setup

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Sony KDL-65X9005A

→ £5,000 Approx → www.sony.co.uk → Tel: 0844 8466 555

HIGHS: Stellar native 4K and upscaled picture quality; brilliant audio performance; design and build quality

LOWS: No HDMI 2.0; very large body; online portal UI needs a polish

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Toshiba 65L9363

→ £4,500 Approx → www.toshiba.co.uk → Tel: 0844 800 2835

HIGHS: Fair value; great native 4K images – especially where colours are concerned; powerful sound

LOWS: Slightly soft upscaled pictures; poor online content; average contrast

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing home cinema on a DIY basis may leave the system performing at way below its optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street.
01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street.
01628 633995
www.audiovenue.co.uk

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street.
01603 627134
www.martinhifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street.
01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.co.uk

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road.
01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street.
020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.co.uk

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road.
020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street.
024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info



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VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
SERVICE ★★★★★
FACILITIES ★★★★★
VERDICT ★★★★★

...Talk to the experts

The business of projection

The bargain price of Epson's EH-TW490 may tempt you, but it's been designed to earn a crust in the boardroom as well as your lounge. **Martin Pipe** goes to work



ALTHOUGH CALLED A 'home projector', Epson's EH-TW490 is compact, weighs only 2.4kg and even arrives with a neat travelling case – in this regard, it looks like it's been designed as much for the travelling salesman as the movie-mad AV enthusiast. Furthermore, the resolution is only 1,280 x 800 (essentially 720p), although connectivity does include HDMI, so cash-strapped BD fans may well be interested.

Other inputs include a VGA port for computers, plus composite, S-Video and a USB port. Into the latter you can insert a flash drive containing JPEGs. The USB port can also display computer images if the supplied driver is installed on your PC; a wireless alternative is the optional WLAN link dongle. As with many projectors of its ilk, a 2W speaker is fitted.

The EH-TW490's imager is an RGB trio of 0.59in polysilicon TFT LCD panels. They're backlit by a 200W UHE lamp, which can be switched to 'eco' mode. This combination throws its light onto your screen via a shuttered 1-1.2:1 zoom lens, which, along with focus, is adjusted via thumbwheels recessed into the top panel. Next to these is a slider that electronically compensates for horizontal keystone-distortion. Basic operating controls are also top-mounted, although a remote is also provided.

The lens has a rather long throw compared to those of most domestically pitched units. If you

want a 150in widescreen image, you'll need at least 5m of projection distance. Widescreen images of up to 310in are possible, but you'll need 10m of throw to play with. No wonder that backlight is so powerful; a brightness of 3,000 Lumens is specified.

Best to go green

With images of typical home cinema proportions, pictures are overly bright. The lamp-life-prolonging 'eco' mode (which also quietens a rather noisy cooling fan) is thus essential. Epson claims a contrast ratio of 12,000:1, which is no doubt achieved via the auto-iris feature. This makes quite a racket when scenes change in brightness and, even with its fast-acting mode, the feature's effects are visible on the picture. It's thus best turned off, but this brings a visible penalty – even after a basic calibration blacks are always dark-grey, and worse still there's little shadow detail in darker scenes.

As Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) and family escape Philadelphia (actually Glasgow...) in an RV in *World War Z* (Blu-ray), his jacket is rendered as little more than dark mush in the interior shots. And compared to a Full HD display, scenes like Jerusalem's zombie apocalypse are robbed of intricate details. Motion isn't particularly strong, either, with some noticeable judder on fast movement. On the plus side, colour fidelity – a traditional Epson strong-point – is more than acceptable.

Hardly a colossus of the home cinema world, then, but that's not to say the EH-TW490 doesn't have its place – it could be a worthwhile option if you plan to use it mainly as a presentation tool, with occasional domestic use ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No. 2D-only
ULTRA HD: No. 1,280 x 800 (i.e. 720p)
CONNECTIONS: Composite; S-Video; VGA, HDMI; 2 x USB 2.0; phono audio
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 3,000 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 12,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 297(w) x 79(h) x 234(d)mm
WEIGHT: 2.4kg
FEATURES: 16:10 (rather than 16:9) aspect ratio; 3 x 0.59in polysilicon TFT LCD panels; 'eco' mode; 1.2:1 zoom lens; horizontal keystone correction slider; automatic vertical keystone distortion; built-in audio with 2W speaker; 5,000-hour claimed lamp life (6,000 in 'eco' mode); 29dB fan noise; 4 x customisable picture presets; 1.3-1.56:1 throw ratio; auto iris; proprietary video processing; onscreen pointer controllable with handset; JPEG picture playback via USB; wireless LAN option

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Budget 720p LCD projector

POSITION:
Epson's current entry-level model

PEERS:
BenQ W1070;
Vivitek D950HD;
Mitsubishi EW270U

HCC VERDICT

Epson EH-TW490

→ £550 Approx → www.epson.co.uk

→ Tel: 0871 423 7766

HIGHS: Pleasing colour reproduction; some business-friendly features; high brightness suits large images

LOWS: Poor black levels; some motion judder visible; long projection distances

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Streaming with a smile

Martin Pipe gives us his verdict on the Roku 3 – a media player that retains the quirky design of its forebears but adds some useful new features



The Roku 3's handset features a headphone output – clever!

LAST YEAR WE reviewed the Roku LT, a cute streamer with Wi-Fi hookup, slick interface and neat handset. It offers loads of on-demand content, arranged into a grid of channels that can be added to or removed from as you choose. Among them are BBC iPlayer, Sky's NowTV, Demand 5 and Netflix. It's redolent of Boxee, only rather cooler, and with a need to provide credit card details during registration so that you pay for chargeable content. Now we have the LT's £100 bigger brother, the Roku 3. That's 'bigger' as in functionality; the two players are of similar size.

You're now given a choice of dual-band Wi-Fi or Ethernet, ensuring that all connection bases are covered. The Roku 3 also offers casual games; indeed, you're given *Angry Birds Space*. If the internal memory fills up with games and channels, you can now bolster it via a micro-SD card slot. To aid gameplay, the handset has been enhanced with motion-sensitivity and a pair of 'action' buttons. The icing on the cake, though, is the remote's headphone socket. Plug in a pair (earbuds are supplied) and the TV sound mutes. You can then watch or play without disturbing others. This feature is also great if you're listening to music ('net radio, Rdio, etc are onboard), and the remote has a good range; only after moving ten metres from the unit did the sound start to break up.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: HDMI-only streaming media player

POSITION: Currently tops the four-strong Roku range

PEERS: Sony SMP-N200; Roku LT; LG SP820

Moving back to AV matters, the Roku 3 drops the LT's analogue AV output – connection is via HDMI only. It supports 1080p for when the device is used for local media playback via the integrated USB socket. To take advantage of this, you'll need the free downloadable 'USB Media Player' channel. It's compatible with MKV, MP4 and FLV, although MPEG-2 files are ignored (presumably for licensing reasons). Oddly, open-source XviD (and DivX) video is also a no-go.

Not on your network

The Roku still lacks a DLNA client for playback of locally networked multimedia. At the time of writing, I couldn't even find a paid-for channel – although proprietary ones (such as Plex, which requires a program to be installed on your PC, and Synology's NAS-centric DSVideo) are available *gratis*. But there's still plenty to get your teeth into; as it stands, Roku features 450+ easily navigable channels.

In picture and sound quality terms, the potential is there; BBC iPlayer was, in HD, just as good as you can expect from a decent Smart TV. A 1080p MKV file, played via USB, looked great. The caveat is that the device, being of US origin, only supports 30/60Hz refresh rates. As a result, motion judder can spoil UK-sourced (25/50Hz) material. It's not too obtrusive, but adding manual refresh-rate selection to the Display Type menu (which currently only gives you 720p/1080p resolution options) would be welcome.

The Roku 3 offers a lot. In use it's absolutely foolproof, the content on offer is good and it's small enough to plug into any TV without upsetting your feng shui. And the new features make it an obvious upgrade on the LT ■

SPECIFICATIONS

CHANNELS: Netflix, NowTV, Crackle, BBC iPlayer, Facebook, Demand 5, Flickr, Vimeo, Spotify, TuneIn, Vevo, Rdio, Shoutcast and more (over 450)

CONNECTIONS: 1 x HDMI; 1 x USB; 1 x micro-SD; Ethernet

DIMENSIONS: 89(w) x 89(d) x 25(h)mm

WEIGHT: 140g
FEATURES: Less than 3.5W typical power consumption; dual-band Wi-Fi a/b/g/n; USB media playback (MP3/AAC/FLAC/WAV audio, JPEG/GIF/PNG/BMP images, MKV/FLV/MP4 (H.264 codec) video); requires registration online to activate; RF remote with 3.5mm headphone socket; two-year warranty; Android/iOS app control; 5.1/7.1 audio passthrough via HDMI

HCC VERDICT

Roku 3 Streaming Player

→ £100 Approx → www.roku.com/uk
→ Tel: 0843 378 0172

HIGHS: Headphone and USB connectivity; excellent user interface; wide range of content overall

LOWS: Some missing channels (e.g. 4oD, ITV Player); no control over video-output refresh rate; MPEG-2 and DivX/XviD unsupported

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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FrontRow™ Home Cinema Seating, 69 London Road, Southborough, Kent TN4 0PA

Adrian Justins is intrigued by the idea of a media server configured to join forces with his Apple TV



The burning issue

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Media streamer
with Blu-ray
compatibility

POSITION:
Sole AV product
from Hage

PEERS:
Kaleidescape One
plus Disc Vault;
Imerge MSI-3D

HOLLYWOOD IS SO afraid that you will make counterfeit copies of your Blu-rays and flog them down the pub it won't let you copy them onto a computer or NAS drive. So convinced of your desire to profit illicitly, it forces you to watch a warning about piracy every time you load a disc, assuming you will have forgotten the laws of the land between viewings. At least with the advent of UltraViolet and digital downloads the studios' stance seems to be softening, and they seem to recognise that such a heavy-handed approach is antediluvian. It may change.

For now, though, the process of overcoming the current restrictions on the copying of one's library of Blu-rays involves one of two options. You could buy a Kaleidescape system (for an approximate cost of £6,500 for a Kaleidescape One with a Disc Vault, in which your discs must reside during playback from the server). That's the totally legitimate way to watch movies in Full HD at 24fps with multichannel hi-res audio at the press of a button. Another way is to invest in some

alternative hardware and software that can circumvent a Blu-ray's copy protection.

Hage claims that the Outclass is the world's first plug-and-play movie and music server dedicated to hold hands with an Apple TV, although it can be configured to work with a range of players. Owning an OutClass server is not illegal but breaking a Blu-ray's DRM is, and in order to rip Blu-rays to the OutClass you have to break the DRM. This requires buying some additional software from a third party.



Rack-mounted multi-terabyte systems can be specified, too

Hage, which is new to the home cinema game but has a background in IT for the CI sector, says it has AV and CI dealers across the UK ready to sell the OutClass (the company doesn't sell direct to the public) but warns against using the server for illegal purposes on its website. You could arguably take the OutClass to a remote country that permits the breaking of DRM and rip all your movies before returning to the UK.

Play it loud

The server itself is not living room-friendly in terms of its design, neither in looks nor running noise. It sounds almost as loud as a microwave oven and ideally will be placed in a separate

'Picture quality seems identical to the original – swapping from one source to another revealed no difference'

room or closed cabinet. It also requires a Cat5 Ethernet connection to your Apple TV or other player. The server comes in sizes from 1TB up to 100TB with rack-mounted and NAS drive configuration options.

The OutClass can work with Mac and Windows operating systems and is supplied fully configured for compatibility with each buyer's specific kit, including DLNA and UPnP devices such as Smart TVs, Sonos systems, Dune HD and Popcorn Hour players. It can playback to more than one device simultaneously and copies can be shifted on to iPads, etc, for offline viewing. Hage will happily reconfigure the server for different devices at any stage for no extra cost, which can be done remotely.

To copy a disc you simply insert it in the tray and the server makes an ISO or BDMV rip, and sucks the metadata – including cover art and subtitles – from the My Movies database, which has over 700,000 titles. It then makes an Apple TV-compatible M4V file at 1080p, which converts the hi-res DTS-HD MA or Dolby TrueHD audio to Dolby Digital 5.1. When done ripping it spits the disc out and another one can be ripped whilst transcoding to the M4V file is underway; downloading the My Movies app to an iPhone allows you to monitor the progress in real-time. A movie such as *Argo* took nearly five hours, although Hage says faster drives are being introduced. Opting for 720p also shaves around an hour off the process and increases the storage capacity, especially if you delete the original ISO rip (approx 40GB per movie) and just keep the Apple TV-compatible M4V file, which is around 7GB. You can, of course, also rip DVDs, which will take less time, and CDs

can be saved as FLAC or ALAC files. If using another type of player, such as a Dune HD, you could enjoy hi-res audio from Blu-rays rather than DD 5.1.

Establishing a link between an Apple TV and the OutClass requires some behind-the-scenes data entry by Hage and you are required to entrust the company with your Apple ID and password. With home sharing switched on in iTunes, and the OutClass selected from the Computers pane on the Apple TV, access is provided to all ripped movies and music. All titles are listed in alphabetical order with artwork and a brief synopsis. You simply select the title and playback will begin from the first frame of the movie (no trailers or FBI warnings here), or where last played if you've stopped halfway through a title. Picture quality watching *Argo* on a Samsung 46F8000 seemed identical to the original Blu-ray – swapping from one source to the other revealed no discernible difference. The scene where Ben Affleck is in the office of the Iranian embassy in Turkey had exactly the same amount of grain and noise in the background. Colour fidelity was identical.

Ripping at 720p is also a decent option as it saves disk space and Apple TV upscales the image. A 720p rip of *Jaws* compared quite favourably with the original Blu-ray in a simultaneous test.

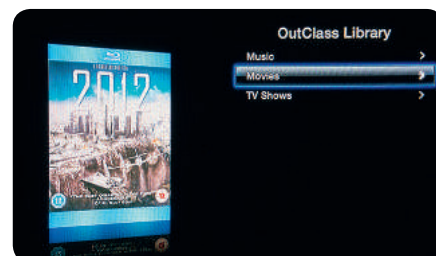
There are, however, some disadvantages to watching the rip on an Apple TV. You don't get access to the extras and although the player lets you fast-forward or rewind, it's not as fast as a Blu-ray deck and you can't skip to the start of the next chapter. Also, sometimes after fast-forwarding I found the audio took a few seconds to catch up with the picture. Once in sync, DD 5.1 audio reproduction with a surround sound system was lively and engaging, with effects delivered to the discrete channels and dialogue blending in with the score and other ambient sounds just as effectively as the original hi-res soundtrack.

Bypassing the Apple TV and going directly from OutClass to my Samsung screen resulted in metadata issues when displaying the movies' names and artwork but these can, I'm assured, be resolved. Hage also says Apple TV can't handle TV box sets very well but other players (the Dune HD for example) can.

A compromised solution?

Hopefully, the above usability issues with the Outclass can be resolved, but the major thorn in its side – Blu-ray copy protection – is out of its control. The legality of Blu-ray ripping (and sheer time involved) will prove a disincentive for many potential buyers, and I suspect some may be put off by the standard unit's rather chunky styling. Others will want to save for a Kaleidescape setup, and others still will be happy just to keep their BDs on a shelf. If you're not one of the above, then check it out ■

ON THE MENU



→ The Outclass server can be supplied configured for partnership with an Apple TV, which is then used as the control platform in conjunction with the downloadable My Movies app

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. From 1TB up to 6TB per chassis

CONNECTIONS: Ethernet; 2 x USB; VGA connection (only used for setup if required, not for video playback); HDMI socket (only used for setup if required, not for video playback)

SUPPORTED VIDEO CODECS: VIDEO_TS, BDMV, ISO, MPEG-2, MP4, M4V

SUPPORTED AUDIO CODECS: DTS-HD MA, Dolby TrueHD, DTS, Dolby Digital, FLAC, DSD, ALAC (M4A), MP3, WAV, WMA

DIMENSIONS: 200(w) x 210(h) x 345(d)mm

WEIGHT: 7kg

FEATURES: Metadata provided by My Movies database; integrates with My Movies app; RAID storage; converts DVD and Blu-ray titles based on selectable MP4 profiles; compatible with Apple TV and DLNA players including Dune HD, Popcorn Hour, XBMC, Windows Media Center, Yamaha NPS2000, Russound DMS 3.1, Logitech Squeezebox, Sonos, Linn DS, Naim Uniti, Control 4 Media Player; compatible with third-party control systems such as RTI and Crestron; available up to 100TB; 2 x Hot-Swappable data drives; 1 x SSD Internal HDD OS software; 1 x CD/DVD/BD Optical Drive

HCC VERDICT



Hage OutClass

→ From £1,500 Approx → www.outclass.co
→ Tel: 01452 610330

HIGHS: Allows multiple viewing in different rooms; simple ripping procedure; integrates with Apple TV seamlessly; excellent support
LOWS: Third-party software required for BD rips; unsightly and noisy; no access to extras on Apple TV; fast-forwarding unreliable

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Play it again, Sonos

One of the leading players in the multiroom audio market wants to introduce the concept to the masses. **Adrian Justins** auditions the most affordable Sonos speaker yet

SONOS HAS BEEN one of the top dogs in wireless audio for some time, where its stylish Play:3 and Play:5 speakers lend themselves perfectly to multiroom use. The beauty of Sonos's proprietary system is that you can have as many speakers as you like running simultaneously and are restricted only by the range and bandwidth of your network. Being able to pick and choose at random where you want to listen to music stored on a computer, smartphone or tablet is liberating.

The Play:1 is a new addition to the portfolio and is Sonos's most affordable speaker yet. The company recently told *HCC* it sees the Play:1 fulfilling the role of a rear speaker in a multichannel set up, with a PlayBar soundbar taking on L/C/R duties and a Sonos SUB on LFE patrol, but the lack of HDMI inputs on the PlayBar makes this an awkward option, so we think it best to look at the Play:1 in the context of a wireless music speaker.

The Play:1 has been designed with two all-new drivers to deliver a bigger sound than you'd expect from a 16cm-tall speaker, with a 3.5in midbass unit joined by a 1in tweeter. The canister-like design is a touch bland but the build quality is high. The only socket is an Ethernet for connecting to a router. Handily, if used as a stereo pair only one speaker needs to be connected to the router. Another option is to connect wirelessly to a Sonos Bridge (which you connect by Ethernet to the network). On



top are controls for volume adjustment and a play/pause button, which allows you to leave home, return later and instantly resume playing the same track. Quickly double-pressing the button advances the playlist to the next track.

Refined control

Setup requires the Sonos app, which has been refined and now allows you to move from one system in one building to another without requiring

a reset. Handy for the lake house or city crash-pad, I suppose. The app's range of sources would make the Stasi jealous, providing seamless access to internet radio, NAS and other DLNA drives, online services including Spotify and Rdio, and even Amazon Cloud Player. A Favourites feature lets you quickly access preferred stations, artists and playlists from subscription services – but weirdly not from iTunes.

I paired two of the Play:1s in order to hear stereo reproduction and was highly impressed. Bass response is indeed substantial – *Silent Shout* by techno outfit The Knife sounds meaty and tight – but there's plenty of detail in the higher frequencies with the chimes in *The Four Horsemen* by Aphrodite's Child and Demis Roussos's alto vocals comfortably room-filling.

The Play:1s aren't as capable as the Play:3s or Play:5s at higher volumes: they don't distort but do sound less controlled. Yet for small-to medium-sized rooms they have more than enough power in a pair to deliver a clean, engrossing and lively sound.

As an affordable introduction to a Sonos system this new speaker is a smart idea – especially the press-to-play button on top – but those already in ownership of Play:3s and Play:5s may find it a little underwhelming ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 3.5in mid-woofer; 1 x 1in tweeter
AMPLIFICATION: Discrete amplification, power rating not given

CONNECTIONS: Ethernet
DIMENSIONS: 119(w) x 161(h) x 119(d)mm

WEIGHT: 1.85kg
FEATURES: Compatible with MP3, WMA, AAC, OGG, Audible, FLAC, ALAC files; Sonos app provides iTunes access, Tune.in internet radio, Rdio, Spotify, 7digital, 8tracks, Amazon Cloud Player, DAB.fm, Deezer, Last.fm, Napster, Qobuzm Stitcher, The Hype Machine, Wolfgang's Vault, Sonos Labs; sleep timer; alarm; line-in; DLNA; system requirements of Windows XP SP3 and higher, Macintosh OS X 10.6 and higher; humidity resistant; EQ settings (bass, treble, balance, loudness)

HCC VERDICT



Sonos Play:1

→ £170 Approx → www.sonos.com

→ Tel: 0808 234 6596

HIGHS: Solid build; tight, powerful sound; impressive app integration; welcome addition of play/pause button

LOWS: Possibly a bit too clinical sounding; dull design; a tad pricey

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Wireless multiroom speaker

POSITION: Entry-level model in a range of three

PEERS: Pure Jongo T4; Bose SoundTouch; Sonos Play:3

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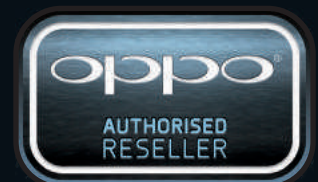


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Soundbase speakers

Adrian Justins gets to grips with six one-box speakers that not only promise an improvement on his TV's audio – they will sit snugly underneath it, too

THE SPEAKERS BUILT into modern flatscreen televisions are generally not suited to the task of accompanying HD movies. Where you want punchy, absorbing sonics, you're more likely to get a narrow, lightweight soundstage – with the worst offenders sounding as feeble as a mouse with a sore throat. There are myriad ways of giving your TV an audio boost, and while we would always prefer a multichannel solution, there are situations (with a second screen, for example) when a compromise works best.

Soundbars are hugely popular, but many flatscreens lack the space between bottom-

edge and tabletop to accommodate one; a slew of manufacturers have recently started making soundbases, or TV pedestals that can be used as a plinth.

'The large footprint should, in theory, yield superior full-range audio, especially at the lower end'

Sizes vary so that not all soundbases are suitable for larger TVs. But even those that are too small for use as a plinth can be slotted in to a cabinet shelf where their larger footprint compared with most soundbars should, in theory, yield superior full-range audio, especially at the lower end of the dynamic spectrum – most models have one or two down-ward firing bass drivers.

In terms of connections, all of the products tested here feature a digital optical input, but beyond that there's significant variation. Some also sport HDMI, others offer USB media playback or Bluetooth audio streaming.

£250 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

Panasonic SC-HTE80

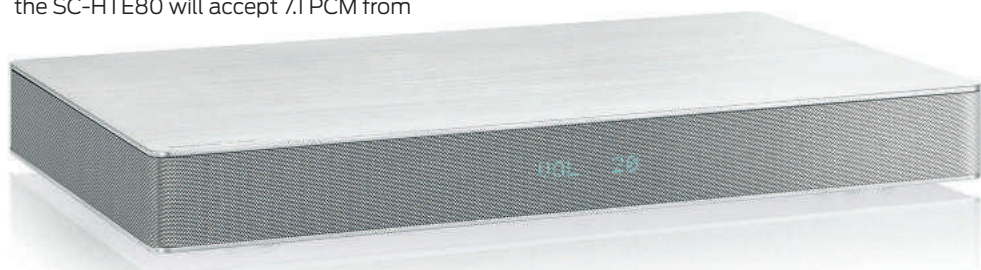
More affordable than most and with excellent connectivity, this is a great all-round option

WITH A FOOTPRINT of 46 x 28cm the SC-HTE80 looks (colour differences aside) like a slightly shrunken version of the Canton DM 50, with largely unadorned surfaces and a dot matrix display hidden behind the cheese grater grill across the front. Build quality is similar too but its smaller capacity can only withstand a maximum 30kg. Two downward-firing woofers are complemented by just two forward-facing full-range drivers. Further differences become apparent upon making a rear inspection, with the provision of dual HDMI's; although decoding is limited to Dolby Digital and DTS, the SC-HTE80 will accept 7.1 PCM from

a Blu-ray deck. Direct connection to a TV can be made by optical means or HDMI as the output socket is ARC-compatible. Bluetooth is onboard, with the benefit of NFC pairing, but apt-X is absent. Power output is a claimed 30W per channel plus 60W for the sub.

The supplied remote control is flat, compact and lightweight, but not cluttered and it works well in combination with the display behind the grille. Calibration options include six DSP sound modes, dialogue and subwoofer level adjustment, auto gain control and a harmonic bass boost.

Despite its lowly power output claim, the SC-HTE80 compares favourably with its rivals here is capable of delivering a satisfying soundfield, especially if you choose the right DSP mode. Tony Stark's chatter in *Iron Man 3* is muffled when 3D Clear Dialogue mode is off, switch it on and even all of Selina Myer's aides in *Veep* are distinguishable. Disparate effects in the snow-scene crash and barfight in *Iron Man 3* are clear and the dynamic range remains nicely balanced. Music reproduction with Bluetooth-streamed MP3s feels a little thin in the higher registers and is dominated by the bass response.



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-HTE80 System → £250

Overall ★★★★★

Orbitsound SB60

This glamorous-looking speaker lacks bonus features, but sounds clean and balanced

THE CLUMSILY NAMED SB60 airSOUND BASE stands out as the only model here with a glossy finish. This runs the risk of incurring scuff marks or scratches and adds to the cost. Handled with care though, it does look the part. For added interior design flexibility it is supplied with interchangeable black and silver grilles. Orbitsound says every screen up to 42in on the market will fit on its 60cm x 30cm footprint.

Fashioned from 20 individual distortion-minimising wooden sections, the SB60 has twin sealed 2in front speakers, a 5in down-firing hybrid subwoofer and two side-firing sealed 2in drivers. Socketry consists of just optical digital, stereo phonos and a 3.5mm line-in with no wireless audio streaming option. The optical input accepts PCM signals with no Dolby Digital or DTS decoders. Like the Onkyo and Cambridge Audio Minx, the SB60 uses a single LED behind the grille to indicate its status. In standby it glares with laser-like



redness and turns blue when switched on, remaining excessively bright, which can be distracting in low light. The smallish remote has cramped lozenge-style buttons and in the absence of dedicated EQ modes, allows adjustment of bass and treble.

Audio from the 200W amplifier is highly impressive in terms of power, clarity and dispersion. Volume isn't the loudest but distortion is absent and the tonal balance seems about right. Tony Stark's dialogue in *Iron Man 3* is rich and resonant, although some of the individual effects such as sparks during the snow crash aren't as distinct as they could be.

Despite the inconvenience of connecting an iPod by cable, the SB60 makes a reasonable fist of things with music. Pleasingly, there's very little need to tweak the bass and treble when changing sources and the SB60 doesn't prove tiring even after long listening sessions.

HCC VERDICT

Orbitsound SB60 → £300

Overall ★★★★★

£350 Approx → www.onkyo.co.uk

Onkyo LS-T10

Built to accommodate big TVs, Onkyo's offering also packs plenty of power

IN TERMS OF size the 70cm-wide LS-T10 is hands down the biggest model on test, making it more likely to accommodate screens in excess of 40in than any of its rivals if shoe-horning in between tabletop and TV is a prerequisite. Its large capacity provides space for a six-channel class D amp with six full-range drivers complementing the separately powered, downward-firing 21W sub. Inputs are recessed on the rear and comprise both variants of digital audio and a 3.5mm line-in. A flash drive-compatible USB is somewhat inconveniently tucked out of sight around the back. The optical input provides compatibility with Dolby Digital as well as PCM signals.

The unit can be adjusted in terms of its volume and power automatically using a TV's remote thanks to its preprogrammed IR codes, which are compatible with nine major TV makes. Trouble is, most likely you'll want to experiment with the sound modes and adjust the woofer, which requires using the supplied



wafer-thin remote control.

There's no display but there is a single white power-on LED behind the grille and there are a small selection of icons on the top of the unit that glow according to the mode. Mostly, you use your ears to guide you, which works well enough.

The LS-T10's problems lie in the performance department. With no EQ adjustment it can be hard to find the right listening mode from the three presets. *House on Sky Atlantic* is best in Music mode, with Movie mode making dialogue sound swirly. *The Big Lebowski* sounds clearer in News mode. The unit has power in abundance and is adept at filling the room but all three modes

have a clinical edge to them; the crashing water tower in *Iron Man 3* is harshly metallic. Music played via Bluetooth lacks detail in the higher frequencies but the bass is emphatic.

HCC VERDICT

Onkyo LS-T10 → £350

Overall ★★★★★

Canton DM 50

High price – but high-quality as well

THE DM 50'S design and build are sturdy and unassuming, especially in its black livery (a white option is also on sale). It can bear a 40kg load and has dimensions of 54 x 30cm. There are no HDMI inputs so hi-res BD audio cannot be decoded but digital optical and coaxial inputs provide a pathway for PCM signals with Dolby Digital decoding and DTS TruSurround playback. Wireless Bluetooth audio is compatible with the CD-quality apt-X codec. The unit claims 200W max to its tweeters, two mid-range drivers and dual underside woofers. Low-end response is rated at 40Hz, with a subwoofer line out provided for supplementary grunt. Stereo phonos are onboard.

There are no controls on the unit itself and the hefty mid-sized remote control is durable, if a tad unergonomic. In standby all you see through the grille is a tiny red light; switch on and a five-character scrolling dot matrix display appears. The DM 50 offers a fair degree of customisation with three positioning

presets, treble/bass management, lip sync adjustment and switching between stereo and virtual surround.

Despite the limited display the DM 50 is easy enough to operate thanks to a logical menu structure, nicely laid-out remote and slick operation. Performance is excellent – Robert Downey Jr's muttered dialogue in *Iron Man 3* is always intelligible and effects such as clanking metal, explosions and the suit crash-landing in snow resonate with reasonable clarity and impact. The surround



mode merely disperses sound at the expense of dialogue sharpness. Music is a strong point; Bluetooth streaming of Jeff Buckley's *So Real* has tremendous bass thump and smooth vocal reproduction.

HCC VERDICT

Canton DM 50 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

£200 Approx → www.cambridgeaudio.com

Cambridge Audio Minx TV

Aimed at those with small budgets, the Minx is perhaps best-suited to those with small TVs, too

THE APTLY NAMED Minx is minimalist in several senses, with an absence of controls and displays on its body and a form factor that's not much larger than a briefcase. It has, however, been stress tested to support televisions up to 30kg, so its meagre 49cm width could prove the main limiting factor in terms of logistics. It offers an optical, stereo phono and a 3.5mm aux input, all of which are outward-facing on the rear. It uses a single white LED, which is hidden behind the front stocking-like grille to indicate its power status (and this flashes during Bluetooth

pairing), otherwise you have to use the remote to confirm or select inputs and sound modes. No wider than two fingers, the remote is titchy (easy to lose down the back of the sofa maybe) but its 12 buttons are at least clearly labelled.

The Minx TV's two 2.25in Balanced Mode Radiators use a piston effect to push sound all around the room. Along with the 50W subwoofer they are powered by a 100W digital amp and manage to generate a deceptively large sound for their size. There are four EQ modes: TV; Film; Music and Voice. Differences

between them aren't as profound as expected but at least each one does seem suited to the genre it's named after. Dialogue in *Iron Man 3* can sound shrill but at least it's distinct from the background noises. It can go loud without distorting but the Minx TV isn't the most refined of performers, the collapsing water tower in the Marvel movie lacks the clarity heard elsewhere and higher frequencies have a harshness that grates a tad. Music played back via Bluetooth is fairly pleasing; vocals are again a bit shrill but the bass in *Spitfire* by Public Service Broadcasting comes across nice and meaty.



HCC VERDICT

Cambridge Audio Minx TV → £200

Overall ★★★★★

Bose Solo TV Sound System

An impressive performance makes up for this speaker's spartan feature set



THE SOLO IS the pedestal speaker that started it all, having proved successful for Bose, which understandably shows no signs of replacing it.

Not that it should be an issue for most of today's slimscreens, but the weight limit is a slightly restrictive 18kg and the 52cm x 31cm footprint lends itself to smaller screens anyway. It works fine placed on a separate shelf as long as there's room for the rear bass ports to breathe. Connections-wise, the Solo offers a coaxial audio input as well as optical and stereo analogue phonos, plus it supplies

one of each type of cable. Less conveniently, the instructions tell you not to have more than one device connected at once.

With no EQ options and the default source being whatever's hooked up, the remote control is as elementary as they come, with only four buttons for controlling power and volume. Equally minimal is the single LED light that glows and blinks according to the unit's status.

The Solo is aimed at the armchair enthusiast who simply wants a better sound and would prefer to use their hands for

scoffing popcorn rather than playing around with settings. It's a high-risk strategy but, for the most part, it works. The kitchen fight and water tower scenes in *Iron Man 3* are highly engaging with significant impact across the dynamic range and plenty of low-end grunt. There's a strong sense of refinement that allows dialogue between Tony Stark and Savin to be delivered with clarity. High-frequency effects can sound a little clipped, however.

Musically, the Bose Solo really gets going, taking Jeff Buckley's *So Real* in its stride with nicely balanced bass, lead guitar and vocals. A decent offering, then, if light on features.

HCC VERDICT

Bose Solo TV Sound System → £350

Overall ★★★★★

Final standings

NONE OF THE TV-accommodating speakers here do a poor job in terms of performance – any would prove a good investment against sticking with your flatscreen's speakers, so design, price and connections may influence your decision.

There are two from our roundup that stand out, though. The Canton DM 50 impresses thanks to a strong, powerful overall sound, good feature count and a user-friendly display. However, at £400, it's the most expensive model on test here. Consider, then, the Panasonic SC-HTE80, which while less potent, still has a refined sound, and matches that with a neat design, highly competitive price and a decent feature set that includes HDMI connectivity.

Other challengers

Of the remaining quartet, Onkyo's £350 LS-T10 has the largest footprint and is better-suited to larger flatscreens than its rivals. Yet the inaccessible position of its USB

input almost renders this bonus feature pointless and its three sound modes never quite hit the right notes. The Cambridge Audio Minx TV suffers similar problems, with little discernible difference between its presets and a slightly shrill edge. And while it is highly affordable, it's design is a bit unusual and you may struggle to install a large TV on top of it.

The Bose Solo fails on the connectivity front – allowing only one source to be hooked up at a time is unfortunate. Yet despite an absence of tweakable EQ options it delivers a credible all-round performance. The smart-looking Orbitound SB 60 is neatly designed, apart from the excessively bright LED status light, and its sound is tonally balanced, if a little lacking in detail.



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DIGITAL COPY

Stunned by the results of a survey of telly-watching preferences, **Mark Craven** discovers he is proud to be abnormal, and says you should be to

IN CASE YOU didn't know it, you are not an ordinary person. Not in a bad way – I don't mean you put the milk in before pouring the tea, or have dyed all your body hair bright pink – but in terms of our country's TV-viewing habits, you're a bit of an oddity. Here's why...

Recently, a survey of UK adults revealed that just 23 per cent of us believe HD is a 'must-have' for televisual enjoyment. The research was based on a sample of 2,000 gogglebox-watchers, and conducted on behalf of Humax. Most surveys are paid for by a particular organisation, keen to spin the results out into a newsbite that media people, such as myself, will pass on, name-checking the company in question (duly done...). I get oodles of these in my email inbox, but the Humax one caught my eye – as **the suggestion that less than a quarter of people think HD is worth getting excited about is bizarre.**

The survey throws up other statistics to compare to that 23 per cent figure. For instance, only three per cent feel the same way about 3D (not too surprising, I suppose) and 65 per cent have a PVR. Of the latter, 87 per cent use it to regularly record TV. I guess the other 13 per cent are still trying to work out how to use it. And then there's the ability to pause and rewind Live TV, which is deemed essential by 36 per cent of respondents.

Consider that for a second: in the modern-day UK, most people are more fussed about whether they can pause a TV programme than if it's actually being broadcast at a resolution that's been kicking around for 20 years or so.

(I also wonder if Humax were prepared for such a low figure, seeing as the company's product range is made up of Freesat and Freeview HD PVRs. But that's by the by).

As an *HCC* reader I know you think differently. You actively seek out HD channels on your EPG. If you have Sky, you've adjusted the channel guide so native HD content is highlighted yellow. You've been interested in hi-def since it first appeared. You buy Blu-rays over DVDs whenever possible. You're already planning on upgrading to 4K. That is you – and you are not normal. In 2014, normal is being more concerned with convenience than quality.

Going round in circles?

You may be wondering: 'So? What's new?' After all, the convenience-versus-quality discussion has been going on for years. Yet I'm wondering where this apparent lukewarm interest in hi-def TV relates to the growth of 4K.

The current trend amongst tech-watchers is to say that easily-available 4K material is needed to ensure the 4K home revolution takes off fully. But the Humax survey suggests that even if there was an abundance of 3,840 x 2,160 content, many people wouldn't be that bothered about watching it. It is, apparently, hard enough to convince people of the benefits of HD.

All this comes at a time when the BBC has finally added extra channels to its HD lineup. In December, 1080i simulcasts of BBC Three, BBC Four, BBC News, CBBC and CBeebies appeared on EPGs, more than doubling the Beeb's hi-def output in one swoop. Personally, I think this is great news – especially as it's now nearly seven years since the first BBC HD trials – and I assume you do to. As for the rest of the UK population, they're apparently too busy fiddling with their timeshift settings to notice ■

*Do you think there are enough HD TV channels?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven once took part in a survey that involved tasting different kinds of biscuits. He hasn't worked as diligently on anything since





FILM FANATIC

Why does **Anton van Beek** find it so hard to choose a favourite film? And what does it have to do with a classic Kevin Bacon musical-drama?

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE film? It's a fairly innocuous question that every movie fan has probably been asked at one time or another. And it's also the type of question that you'd think somebody who writes about films as part of his job would find pretty easy to answer. Yet this simple enquiry causes me immense frustration.

One part of the issue is down to the subtle difference between favourite and best, a distinction that seems to elude some people. There are countless movies such as *Citizen Kane*, *Vertigo*, *Battleship Potemkin*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Bicycle Thieves* that I admire greatly, whose importance to the evolution of cinema I can appreciate, and that stand as works of art. But despite the high esteem in which I hold these films, none of them are actual favourites of mine.

This is because the very idea of a 'favourite film' is something much more personal, and open to as many external influences as it is to the effect that the movie itself has on you. This is why **the memories that come flooding back whenever I hear Kenny Loggins belting out the title song from *Footloose*** play just as large a part in my enjoyment of that daft '80s musical-drama as watching poor old Chris Penn struggling to master the art of dancing on the beat...

Now, I feel compelled to point out that this is not a roundabout way of coming out and admitting that *Footloose* is my favourite film – I'm not completely mad. But, if given the choice, I would undoubtedly re-watch it over many of the films I actually admire more.

And there are still countless other flicks that I absolutely adore. How is anybody supposed to pick just one film from a list that includes – in my case

– *Singin' in the Rain*, *In Bruges*, *RoboCop*, *Withnail & I*, *Halloween*, *Dr. Strangelove...*, *This is Spinal Tap*, *King Kong* (1933), *The Haunting* (1963), *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *Once Upon a Time in China 2*, *The Third Man*, *The Night of the Hunter*, *The Big Sleep*, *Chinatown*, *Casablanca*, *Videodrome*, *Taxi Driver*, *Blue Velvet*, *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Blade Runner*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Jaws*, *Let the Right One In* and so many others? It's impossible!

I can't even base a decision on simply selecting the film that I've watched the most. Chances are that would probably be *Alien* – which is all well and good as it's a great piece of cinema. The trouble is that I can name plenty of movies off the top of my head that I like even more than Ridley Scott's sci-fi horror, such as John Carpenter's chilling *The Thing* or Howard Hawks' sublime *His Girl Friday*.

Keeping my options open

Most importantly, why would I ever want to limit myself to a single favourite film in the first place? The great thing about being a five-flicks-a-weekend movie fanatic is that I've now got a massive library of titles I love on Blu-ray and DVD. Each and every one is a favourite of a kind, depending on how the mood takes me.

And, of course, the film industry itself just keeps on giving, cranking out movies at a fantastic pace. Of the 300 or so features that I watched in 2013, only around a third of them were repeat viewings. The remaining 200 were therefore completely new to me, and amongst them were contemporary releases – like *Gravity* and *Django Unchained* – that will no doubt be added to my ever-growing list of favourites ■

So, what's your all-time favourite film? And why? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek may not be willing to admit it in this month's column, but Team HCC knows that *Footloose* really is his favourite film of all time...



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Features: Profigold iPod hi-fi audio cable for portable audio and mp3 players.

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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology?
Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Thoughts on 4K, part I

I've been into home cinema for nearly two decades, moving through LaserDisc and CRT to Blu-ray and home projection, and now is the time to be thinking about upgrading again, to 4K.

It's obvious from the number of 4K flatscreen TVs (and a few projectors, too) on sale that this is where 'the industry' thinks home entertainment is headed next (of course, we heard similar things about 3D only a few years ago, and look what happened to that – utter failure). However, I'm not planning to upgrade to 4K yet. The reason? It's too early to say whether it will be worth the money.

My current projector (an Epson model) cost me around £2,000,

yet the 4K projector from Sony sells for close to £9,000. My current Panasonic plasma that I use in my living room is a 50in set, and I paid £1,500 for it. At present there are no 50in 4K screens on offer, but a 55in 4K model costs around twice that figure.

I understand that 'early adopters' are always needed to kickstart a new format, but at these prices it simply won't be me.

I will wait until (and if) 4K takes off and prices come down before replacing my hardware.

And, anyway, what incentive is there for me to do that at the moment? When HD TVs were launched in the UK we already knew an HD disc format was on the way, as it had been shown off in Japan. But with 4K nothing has been confirmed. Similarly, 4K TV channels seem a very long way

Early Blu-ray adopters paid £1,000 for Sony's BDP-S1E. AV fans buying a 4K TV now face high prices, too

off, especially as we still have plenty of standard-def services in the UK. As far as I can see, the appeal of 4K at the moment is about upscaling, and I'm not going to pay out my hard-earned pennies just to be able to do that.
Rob, via email



★ STAR LETTER...

Home cinema doesn't need to be expensive – just good enough for you

Hi all. In *HCC* #228, Mark Craven mentioned about how the home cinema product makers can cater for every need and every budget. I must say what a great industry home cinema is. Like Mark says, it's not only if you need high-end reference-level models. Even with basic equipment you will always get big bangs for your buck. Of course, the more bucks the bigger the bangs!

This again can be said for home installs, whether it's a purpose-built multi-million pound affair or a garage conversion, or just simple units or stands in your living room. But no matter what your equipment is or how much you spend on it, the main point to it all is: how good was the movie for you with the system you have?

I would also like to ask, with the market for home cinema TVs moving and changing all the time, when is it the right time to buy? There are great deals on Smart Full HD TVs at present, but with 4K sets now coming through should we hang on for the latest tech? I thought that 3D sets when they started would take an age to drop in price so I bought a Panasonic 50in plasma. Less than eight months later 3D sets were the same price. Is 4K going mainstream and will prices fall? And with no standard for 4K yet is it time to buy or wait?

Leigh Jameson, via email

Mark Craven replies: You've hit the nail on the head

there, Leigh – the point of home cinema is to watch movies, so if you enjoyed the experience, then what kit you have is entirely irrelevant.

As for your questions about 4K. Should you hang on before buying? If you're asking that, it probably means you

have a budget to work to, so, yes, you might want to see the price points and screen sizes that arrive this Spring. And buying a 4K display when there's a paucity of content is, ultimately, your decision. Like fellow letter-writer Rob (above) you might think upscaled HD isn't worth the outlay. But our grouptest on page 55 highlights the performance push you can get from your Blu-rays.

Star letter-writer Leigh Jameson wins a copy of *White House Down* on Blu-ray, courtesy of pals friends at Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. The latest blockbuster from 'master of disaster' Roland Emmerich, this action-packed epic arrives on Blu-ray on January 20, priced at £24.99 approx.



Mark Craven replies: A step up from a £2,000 projector to a £9,000 model is certainly not a decision to be taken lightly, but, particularly where TVs are concerned, you should find prices for 4K hardware continuing to come down next year.

Thoughts on 4K, part II

Regarding Richard Stevenson's column (HCC #228) about the inevitability of 4K TVs, personally I can't wait. Home cinema needs to move forward with the rest of technology, and if digital cameras can give photographers 4K images then I don't see why film fans should be left stuck at Full HD. Yes, the new hardware is pricey, as it always is, and, yes, we need the content, as we always do, but if you're not excited by viewing movies at four times the resolution of Blu-ray in the comfort of your home then you're not really a home cinema fan at all!

M. Benton, via email

Richard Stevenson replies: At last, someone has agreed with me! Time for a lie down...

More to the point, you're completely right. Home entertainment should always be moving forward technologically – not just so manufacturers can carry on making money, but so we always get the best experience available.

Enough with the horror

I have been purchasing HCC now for approximately seven months. I did find it very interesting, but in HCC #228 and HCC #227 you seem to be concentrating more (especially in #228) on every type of horror film remake and current horror that is on the market. To concentrate on subjects such as this continually I find somewhat disturbing and slightly unhealthy.

You might find these comments amusing, but to continually glorify horror is a bit sad. I do hope this trend doesn't continue, as I will cease paying £4.50 per month for it.

R.C. Ingram, via email

Anton van Beek replies: You are right in that both those issues may have seemed particularly heavy on the horror front when it



Box office hits like *Psycho* explain Hollywood's love of horror

came to software. The reasoning is that they were published at a time when the horror genre is making waves – Halloween. HCC #227, which was on sale mid-October, included a look at horror film franchises should you be planning a fright-flick marathon over the Halloween weekend. And in the following issue's Playback section we reviewed many of the new horror film Blu-rays that are typically released at that time of year.

The reason for the latter is obvious: we review whatever discs are put on sale, and publishers like StudioCanal are always going to choose the Halloween period for titles like *The Wicker Man: Final Cut* – they're looking to gain a bit of a boost in sales from being associated with a time when ghosts, ghouls and gore are on the tip of many people's tongues.

The idea behind the horror

movie franchise feature was, quite simply, that we thought some film fans might enjoy reading it. You say that concentrating on such material is 'somewhat disturbing and slightly unhealthy', and we welcome your opinion as we do that of all our readers, but this boils down to a matter of taste. The horror genre has been one of Hollywood's most successful since cinema's early days, and films such as *Dracula* (1931), *Psycho* (1960), *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* have all proven to be massive box office hits.

There will always be film genres that divide opinion. For every person that dislikes horror films there will be someone bored by sci-fi, unamused by rom-coms or left incredulous by comic book capers. We always try to cover everything fairly (although we naturally give more

coverage to the blockbuster films that are seen by home cinema enthusiasts as core titles) and, as such, horror films will continue to be given coverage in the mag. That said, we've taken your comments on board and will look at how we handle the 'Halloween situation' again next year.

Where's the 5.1 audio?

I'm an avid home cinema fan, who I suspect like most of us were in Utopia when the explosion in HD screens, Blu-ray players,

CONTACT US...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, BR6 6BG, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

Freeview HD channels and PVRs arrived and the satellite broadcasters offered us unstoppable content.

The BBC and Channel Four are now broadcasting a greater amount of their content in 5.1, which I'm able to decode through my Panasonic home cinema system and playback from HD recordings on my Panasonic PVR, [Panasonic fan, eh? – Ed].

Why, then, has ITV not started broadcasting the 5.1 Dolby surround soundtrack with its HD films and programmes? ITV seems to be stuck in the past, broadcasting in stereo and short-changing its viewers.

I have noticed that the 5.1 content from the BBC and Channel 4 now also seems sometimes to be sporadic. Some of the films and shows are broadcast in HD and missing the 5.1 content, including various episodes of *Homeland* on 4HD.

Furthermore, when is Channel 5 going to broadcast in HD on Freeview, and not leave this luxury

for satellite viewers only?

The BBC is taking the lead and expanding its Freeview HD channels, no doubt supported in 5.1 where content allows. *Match of the Day* is broadcast in 5.1 as is *Doctor Who* – so the Beeb should be applauded for driving the frontiers of audience involvement forward. Its innovation is so committed it will probably invent the Holodeck from *TNG* next.

Total enjoyment reaps higher viewing figures. When the dawn of 4K terrestrial broadcasts arrives on Freeview HD, I believe all the broadcasters will have to up their game or their content will look like grainy VHS in comparison.

So to ITV and the other channels: please invest, please begin broadcasting in Freeview HD and use the 5.1 surround codec, and maybe the remaining population who do not wish to pay a fee to a satellite broadcaster will watch your channels more on Freeview HD, and this investment will be



Doctor Who: broadcast by the BBC with 5.1 audio

rewarded with more viewers, which in turn will generate more advertising revenues, and we will all be happier in TV Land. *Name and address withheld*

Mark Craven replies: Channel 5 has previously pulled out of a Freeview HD channel citing commercial reasons, yet it's possible the idea could resurface this year. As for ITV and 5.1 audio, this has been a bugbear of AV fans for years, and no solution

appears to be in sight. As far as we're aware, there were previous technical issues that stopped it rolling out multichannel.

And yes, you're right to say the BBC should be applauded. It may fill its televisual output with dreadful hogwash at times, but the tech advances it pursues make the licence fee worthwhile, in my opinion ■

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



Riddick

Vin Diesel's intergalactic bad-ass returns to DVD and Blu-ray on January 13 with the arrival of the sci-fi smash *Riddick*.

To celebrate the film's release we've joined forces with EntertainmentOne and have three limited edition *Riddick* Blu-ray steelbooks to hand out. So what are you waiting for?

Question:

What was the title of the made-for-DVD animated movie about Riddick?

Answer:

A) Dark Fury B) Dank Anger C) Dim Rage

Email your answer with '**Riddick**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Prisoners

Hugh Jackman and Jake Gyllenhaal star in this thriller about the race against time to find two kidnapped girls. The critically-acclaimed *Prisoners* will make its

DVD and Blu-ray debut on February 3 and thanks to EntertainmentOne we have five copies of the Blu-ray to give away...

Question:

Prisoners star Hugh Jackman is best known for playing which bigscreen superhero?

Answer:

A) Wolverine B) Spider-Man C) Batman

Email your answer with '**Prisoners**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Hell Comes to Frogtown

Pro wrestler 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper stars in this tale of a warrior battling mutant amphibians in a post-apocalyptic wilderness. Arrow Video

unleashes this '80s cult caper on Blu-ray on January 27 – we have five copies to win.

Question:

'Rowdy' Roddy Piper also played the lead in which John Carpenter film?

Answer:

A) Halloween B) Prince of Darkness C) They Live

Email your answer with '**Frogtown**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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WIN A Tannoy HTS 101 sub/sat speaker package!

This award-winning system blends stylish aesthetics with detailed multichannel delivery

TANNOY'S HTS 101 system brings the company's sound quality expertise to the world of compact, stylish home cinema speakers – the ultimate 'no compromise' system for movie fans wanting the very best performance from a simple, sophisticated and elegantly discreet speaker package.

The HTS 101 combines a quartet of satellite speakers, a dedicated centre channel enclosure and a 100W, 8in subwoofer for low-frequency duties.

For the surround speakers, Tannoy has combined neodymium drivers and its proprietary Wideband Tweeter technology with high-density wood fibre cabinets, ensuring a balanced, rich and detailed sound and a smooth roll-off to integrate with the matching woofer. The satellites are voice-matched with the HTS centre channel, which packs twin midbass drivers to bring out the best in cinema dialogue.

Sleek and unobtrusive, each HTS speaker is finished in a deep gloss black, so whether you choose to wall-mount them, or park them on an AV stand, they should blend effortlessly with your décor.

Thanks to our kind friends at Tannoy, we have an HTS 101 system to send out to a lucky reader. All you need to do is answer the following question correctly – you'll find the answer on the Tannoy website – to be in with a chance. Good luck!

Question:

Speaker company Tannoy was founded in what year?

Answer:

- A) 1926
- B) 1936
- C) 1946

Email your answer, plus your name and address, to:
 Competitions@
 homecinemachoice.com
 – with **'Tannoy'** as the subject

For more info on Tannoy's HTS 101 visit:
www.tannoy.com

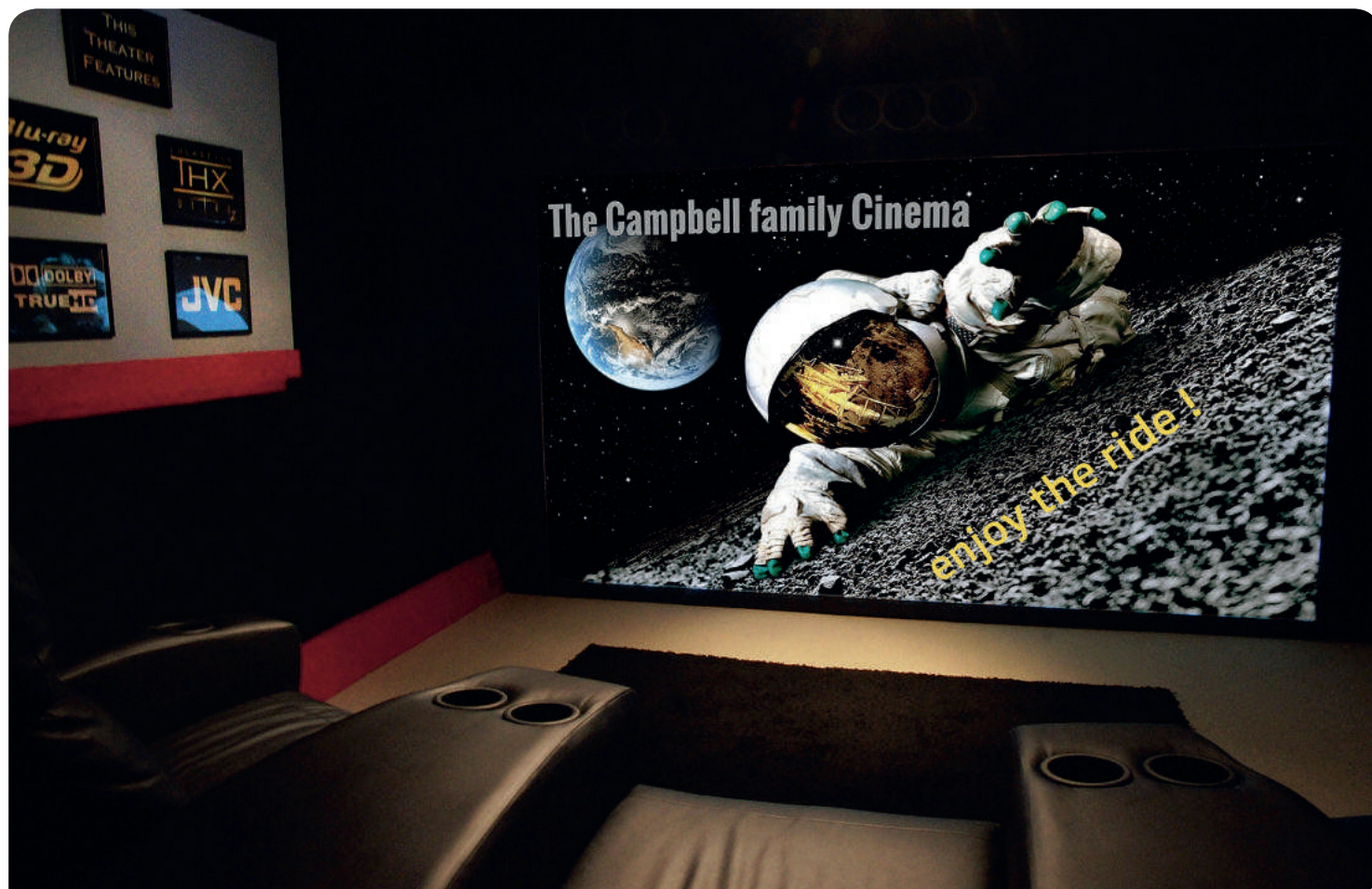
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'I want a BIG screen!'

Brian Campbell reveals how a visit to a local multiplex inspired his own home cinema project



Introduce yourself...

I'm Brian Campbell, 37. I'm an accountant, living in Northern Ireland. I got my first proper hi-fi when I was 12 and have been an AV addict ever since.

When did you decide to tackle your own cinema room?

My project to convert my loft room into this was started in Christmas 2012. I was fortunate that the largest cinema screen in Ireland was built less than a mile away from my house, the Antrim OmniMaxx. I went to watch *The Dark Knight Rises* and was blown away – the screen was huge, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. It was during that epic movie that I thought it would be amazing to try and replicate that at home – my own personal IMAX – so I did it.

I knew that to have such a large screen I needed to be aware of the viewing-distance-to-screen-size ratio but with 4K on the horizon, I knew that the technology would soon support that. I got three projectors head-to-

head – the Sony VPL-VW85, the JVC DLA-X70 and the JVC DLA-X90. Naturally, the high-end DLA-X90 won the battle with its amazing contrast and 4K e-Shift upscaling. The image is so contrast-rich, and with e-Shift engaged a large screen and close viewing distance is not a problem.

I have the Sony VPL-VW500ES 4K projector on my radar and will be viewing it soon when I fly over to Kalibrate Limited in Surrey. It won't have the inky blacks of the JVC – that I know already – but if it can make improvements in other areas then I'll certainly give it strong consideration. The JVC DLA-X90 is holding up fine right now!

So how big is the projector screen?

It's positioned along my sloping ceiling and it's over 60sq ft. When people ask me screen size, they are used to talking inches but I talk in square feet! It's basically wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling. As planned, this has created the effect I was after. You are totally absorbed

AV-Holic Brian has even designed his own pre-movie screen-filler to welcome guests

His digital movie collection is accessed via a Mede8er media player, with an iPad used to browse titles





The JVC PJ is housed in a purpose-built hushbox – vital as it is positioned near the seating area

in the viewing and that's just 2D. When watching 3D, because the screen starts on the floor, it's almost like a portal into another world – on some scenes it feels like you could just get up off your chair and walk into the movie – totally surreal!

It's a custom D.I.Y. screen, built to the exact dimensions that my room will allow, and uses milliskin spandex. When I demo the Sony 4K projector I'm going to look at some different screen materials (Enlightor, Center Stage XD and Screen Innovations). With such a large screen, the challenge is to find a material that retains decent light, shows little or no sign of moiré or other artefacts, has little or no viewing cone, and retains good sound dispersion.

What other kit is in your system?

I've paired the JVC projector with the Onkyo TX-NR3008 AV receiver, which has the HQV Reon-VX chip that is pretty decent. This upscales my Sky+HD 1080i images to 1080p very well and then the JVC takes it to 4K with e-Shift. This pairing gives Sky HD a sharper and more solid-looking presentation, and sports and movies look so much better with this combination – an absolute must see!

I also have a Darbee Darblet in the video chain which adds a very nice sharpening/contrast enhancement to my images, without overcooking it or causing ringing – not the most well-known device but very big in America. So it's a pretty impressive video chain, and I also do my own calibration and

'With 3D it's almost like a portal into another world – it feels like you could walk into the movie!'

have various sensors for ensuring my image's colour, gamma and brightness are bang on, to get me the best image possible.

The Blu-ray player is a Panasonic DMP-BDT320 and I've also got a 3TB NAS drive for storing my movies. My media player is the 3D Mede8er 600x3D. I also have an Xbox 360. Most of my games are 3D-capable as that's how I like to play – so much more immersive.

All these devices are hooked up to my network. My router has an extender switch box for extra ports as I like to have everything connected via LAN. My home automation of choice is LightwaveRF and I can control my lights/sockets, etc, from anywhere in the world.

The LightwaveRF also connects to my iPad Roomie Remote app. This is a lot simpler to set up than others, such as iRule, and non-professionals like me will find it much easier to integrate without the need to employ an installer. And, because all my kit is in a separate room, I need the iPad to control everything and Roomie Remote does a brilliant job. The Mede8er media player is also a great

piece of kit and I can use my iPad to scan through all the covers of my BDs. Then it's just a click and it's playing on screen.

What about the audio side?

The speakers are the Special 'W' edition Focal 800 series for my front three – Focal 816W floorstanders and the Focal 800CCW centre speaker. These are hidden behind the screen. My Onkyo receiver allows front height speakers so after the front left/centre/rights, I have two Linn Komponent 106s for front heights and another pair for the surround channels. The Linn Komponent has the Linn 2K array tweeter so effectively each speaker has two tweeters (along with the additional driver). This works well for the 'effects' speakers; the Linns deliver every nuance with a lovely sense of clarity and space. My subwoofer is a REL Q400e – 400W continuous power but with loads of headroom to reach 1,000W when required for impact moments. More than enough for my room size!

Those seats look comfy...

They're dedicated cinema seats from El Ran, >

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself if you want) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic, and we'll be in touch.



(imported from Canada) with electric recliners and mandatory cupholders – the front three are 11ft from the screen and the back chair, (the 'Directors Chair!') is about 15ft from the screen on a custom-built riser.

It's not the biggest room but it goes to show that with new technology you can have a high-quality largescale cinema experience in even a modest-sized room like mine – as long as you know how to get the best out of your equipment, of course.

The lighting is all controlled via iPad – LED mood lighting and normal spotlighting as well. I've quite a lot of blackout velvet around the walls and ceiling as this supports reflection reduction and gets me higher contrast. I've also built a hushbox (which I'm calling an 'incognito' box) for my DLA-X90 projector as it makes it almost inaudible. And because it's blacked out, you wouldn't even know it's there.

How often do you use the cinema?

I'll watch Champions League football matches and all the major golf tournaments by myself or with friends (The Masters in 3D is the next best thing to being at the tournament!). For films, it's about two movies a week with the kids and maybe one or two grown-up flicks.

What are your current favourite discs?

For 3D, *Despicable Me* and *Despicable Me 2*. These are great kids' movies and the 3D is amazing. Reference adult disc for 3D is *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. With my calibrated JVC PJ, the deep blacks, rich colour and 3D effect is spectacular.

My reference 2D discs are *Skyfall*, *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (astounding contrast and deep blacks) and *Art of Flight*. The latter is a snowboarding movie and is made with high-grade 4K RED cameras. The helicopter panoramic views of the snowy mountains with these wonderfully sharp images gives a sense of scale (and a bit of vertigo!) when watching at this size.



Focal's two-and-a-half-way 816W floorstanders are used for the front left and right channels

Brian conducted a shootout between three projectors – the JVC DLA-X90 came out on top



Overall, though, my favourite disc has to be *Tron: Legacy*. The thumping Daft Punk soundtrack matched with the high-contrast images from my DLA-X90 gives everyone a 'jaw hits the floor' moment every time. I'm sure I'm not alone in saying *Tron...* is a feast for the senses! ■

READY TO TEE OFF!

Our AV-Holic also has a purpose-built garage. For many, this would seem the obvious place for a cinema room, but for Brian it's actually the home of his state-of-the-art golf simulator...



'It's a two-storey garage, with a high ground floor ceiling. My original thoughts for this was the ground floor being a bar with a pool table and entertainment system, and the top floor being a dedicated cinema. But I eventually installed my cinema in my home's loft, so the golf simulator idea for the garage was born.

'With a 10ft-high ceiling, I'm able to swing all types of golf clubs (right up to the driver) so I was fortunate that the garage was constructed this way. I've seen many a golf sim online but I wanted to take mine a step further – I wanted to have real putting and real chipping integrated into the room. This is why I decided to build a putting surface as the garage floor, and after sampling many types of product, I found one than ran as true as a snooker table. I plan to have



some holes cut into the floor so I can have a few different putts and I will put in some undulations to give some slight break to the putts. Around the back edge, I've installed 35mm semi rough which simulates chipping from around the edges of the green. I can either chip onto the putting surface or else bring up some targets onto the projector screen to give me something to aim at.

The simulator has lots of options but the real benefit is being able to play major championship golf courses like Augusta National and St Andrews. The simulator gives onscreen feedback for all sorts of things – clubhead position, clubhead speed, swing plane etc... perfect for fine-tuning my game in the Winter months!

Equipment is an Optoma 525ST ultra short-throw, high Lumens projector. This is necessary as I need to have lights on at the same time as playing the sim. I have Focal wall-mounted speakers either side of the screen, powered by an Onkyo CR715 DAB receiver with iPod dock. I've also added a Velodyne sub to give me some bottom end. I also use the room for practicing my guitar and doing some gym work. A good sound system helps keep the motivation going!



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FILM FRANCHISE

Predator

Celebrating the dreadlocked alien beast that likes to take on Earth's hardest men.



Laser eye surgery, Predator style



Stripped for action: While the Alien skull in *Predator 2* was the first tease of a feature film clash between these deadly extraterrestrials, the creatures first came to blows in a 1989 comic book series





THERE HAVE BEEN plenty of iconic sci-fi film characters – from R2-D2 to RoboCop – but perhaps none more memorable than the human-hunting alien from the *Predator* franchise. With its invisibility cloak, tricky weaponry and habit of collecting human skulls as trophies, the Predator was the invention of screenwriting duo John and Jim Thomas, responding to the need to give the action stars of the 1980s worthy foes.

Its first screen outing in 1987's *Predator* left an impression on audiences. John McTiernan's jungle-set thriller pitted a team of meatheads (among them Arnold Schwarzenegger, Carl Weathers and Jesse Ventura) against the extra-terrestrial, played by towering actor Kevin Peter Hall, and the movie's mix of action, suspense and special effects ensured it ensnared healthy box office takings. The sequel in 1990 proved that it was the Predator itself, not Schwarzenegger, that was the star of the franchise, this time dropping it into Los Angeles for a battle with Danny Glover's cop.

Poorer ticket receipts for *Predator 2* put a dampener on an immediate follow up, but audiences noticing a Xenomorph skull in the creature's trophy cabinet were given an inkling of what would eventually come next – a melding of 20th Century Fox's *Alien* and *Predator* franchises. This fan-pleasing notion eventually spawned books and computer games as well as two movies – *Alien vs Predator* (2004) and *Aliens vs Predator: Requiem* (2007).

Yet the last cinematic outing for the Predator was 2010's reboot *Predators* (sans *Alien* interaction), produced by Robert Rodriguez, a sequel to which is continually mooted. Team HCC wishes the studio would hurry up – five films in 26 years just isn't enough for such a brilliant genre creation.



Monster problems: The original design for the Predator was a long-necked creature with a single eye. Jean Claude Van Damme was hired to wear the orange body suit on location before the idea was scrapped.

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 Predator 2

As good as the first film was, the Predator itself only really pops up in the second half. This sequel makes the creature the star, delivering a rollercoaster ride of mayhem as it slices its way through the streets of a near-future Los Angeles, and the climactic chase is one of the best the genre has to offer.

2 Predator

When your leading man is a former Mr Universe who is almost a special effect himself, it's hard to come up with a convincing threat for him to face off against. That John McTiernan's 1987 sci-fi-action classic does just that is reason enough to love it. All together now: 'Get to da choppaa!'

3 Alien vs Predator

Director Paul W.S. Anderson's slick flick packs in more than enough monster-on-monster action to keep franchise fans entertained (although it's best to not think too much about the plot). And if it's good enough for James Cameron ('I actually liked it a lot,' he told one website), then it's good enough for us, too.

AND THE WORST...

Aliens vs Predator: Requiem

Seemingly more concerned with upping the gore quota than anything else, this second meeting for the two icons was an absolute disaster on all fronts. The film's problems were only compounded when it was released on DVD and BD with a re-timed transfer that was so dark that it's often impossible to see what is happening.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting *Predator* fan can afford to miss out on these...

Predator: Intrada Edition



Alan Silvestri's memorable score for *Predator* has been released on CD several times over the years – the most collectible being this remastered 2010 release, limited to 3,000 copies.

Predator 2 Maquette



The always-dependable Sideshow Collectibles recently announced this stunning 1:4 scale limited edition statue, which is currently expected to ship in August, priced around \$1,200.

Alien vs Predator Arcade Game



This side-scrolling beat 'em up hit arcades in 1994 and lets up to three players battle through an army of aliens as either a Predator or a Colonial Marine (including a cybernetically-enhanced Major Dutch Schaefer). Expect to pay around £500 to £800 at auction.

Predator Omnibus: Volume 1



This 440-page tome collects the three core *Predator* graphic novels written by Mark Verheiden (including 1989's influential *Concrete Jungle*) alongside four additional strips published by Dark Horse Comics in the early '90s.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Want to complete your collection of Predator discs? Then you'll need these...

- | | |
|--|--|
| Predator (R2 DVD) | (Region A BD) |
| Predator: Special Edition (R2 DVD) | Predator 2 (Region B BD) |
| Predator 2 (R2 DVD) | Predator: Ultimate Edition (Region B BD) |
| Predator 2: Special Edition (R2 DVD) | Predators (Region B BD) |
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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **RIDDICK** Vin Diesel's long-awaited sci-fi sequel is here
ALAN PARTRIDGE: ALPHA PAPA Norfolk's first action-comedy is a blast in hi-def **ELYSIUM** Matt Damon wages class warfare in the future **THE WORLD'S END** Calling time on the 'Three Flavours Cornetto' trilogy
BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA John Carpenter's cult favourite is no trouble for Blu **AND MUCH MORE!**

Hi-ho Silver

The Lone Ranger → Walt Disney Home Entertainment → All-region BD

Disney's reimagining of the Western legend may have struggled at the box office, but head over to p99 to see why *The Lone Ranger* still deserves a spin in your player



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



Riddick goes back to basics

Vin Diesel's science-fiction anti-hero is back in (*Pitch*) black as the franchise returns to its roots



HCC VERDICT

Riddick: The Extended Cut

→ EntertainmentOne

→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: It's not going to set your world alight, but this is a fun piece of sci-fi pulp given fine treatment in HD

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

→ RIDDICK

It's been a decade since Richard B. Riddick took on the Necromonger's in David Twohy's bloated sequel to his earlier cult sci-fi hit *Pitch Black*. Against all the odds, Twohy and leading man Vin Diesel have made good on years of promises and have brought the character back to the bigscreen.

Picking up five years after the events of 2004's *The Chronicles of Riddick*, this latest outing quickly dispenses with the whole Necromonger nonsense in favour of essentially doing *Pitch Black* all over again. So Riddick finds himself abandoned on an unknown alien world with a bunch of people out for his blood and a horde of deadly monsters about to wake up and make things worse for everyone. So: not the most original use of the character. Yet we still think it's a smart decision considering how long he's been away from our screens.

And, for those who want a sequel that feels a little less like a reboot and more of a part of what went before, this Blu-ray's Director's Cut delivers an additional eight-minutes of Necromonger action up front to help cement *Riddick*'s place in the franchise. **Picture:** Produced independently of original series backer Universal Studios, *Riddick* isn't a big-budget sci-fi blockbuster. But this certainly hasn't held it back from looking pretty spiffy on Blu-ray.

EntertainmentOne's AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode certainly gets the best out of the extreme colour grading the film was subjected to in post-production, with distinctive yellow hues being mostly free from

banding. Contrast is deliberately amped up to burn out highlights, but this hasn't had a negative effect on blacks, which remain suitably obsidian.

Outside of some of the more obvious visual effects shots, detailing is also strong. This proves particularly true of facial close-ups, with the digital photography picking out every single pore, wrinkle, blemish and hair.

Audio: *Riddick*'s DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix makes very good use of the soundstage to place you within its alien world. Use of the surround speakers is rarely bombastic, but they're deployed with a fair amount of skill in order to accentuate the locations and extra-terrestrial threats Riddick encounters.

Check out Chapter 16 when Riddick *et al* venture out into the night. All at once you're confronted by the sound of gunfire ringing out, unseen creatures moving around on either side and rain pounding the ground all around you. It's a wonderfully cohesive aural landscape, aided by the overall clarity of the track.

Extras: The big bonus for fans of the franchise is the option to watch David Twohy's 127-minute Director's Cut as well as the 119-minute version that crash-landed at cinemas.

The disc also includes the animated web comic *Riddick: Blindsided*, which offers a slightly more action-packed version of the Necromonger assassination attempt that takes place early in the movie. Joining this are five featurettes looking at different aspects of the production – from weapons and vehicles to characters and settings.

We're the Millers

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£25 Approx



This goofy road trip stars Jason Sudeikis as a small-time drug dealer hired to transport 'a smidge' of marijuana into the US from Mexico. His idea? To hire a trio of misfits to pose with him as a family holidaying in an RV – naturally, things do not go as planned. The amiable *We're the Millers* arrives on Blu-ray with a very natural-looking AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode and understandably modest DTS-HD MA 5.1 track that majors on dialogue above all else. Bonuses include seven behind-the-scenes featurettes, eight deleted scenes and the choice to watch the theatrical or extended cut.



The Hangover Part III

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Todd Phillips brings his record-shattering comedy trilogy to a close with a film that – while never plumbing the same depths as its immediate predecessor – still feels a million miles removed from the fun of the original. Still, the return to Vegas enables the AVC 2.40:1 transfer to really show what it's made of through its lustrous blacks and beautifully saturated colours. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 track also proves surprisingly immersive and aggressive for a comedy, with plenty of directional effects and grunt in the low-end. However the extras remains as dismal as those for the earlier films.



The Heat: Uncuffed & Uncut Edition

20th Century Fox → All-region BD
£25 Approx



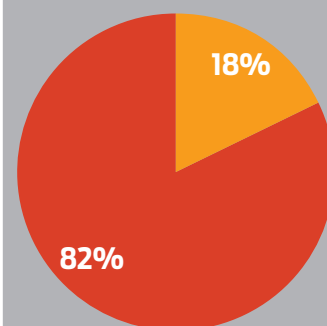
Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy star as the mismatched law enforcement officials who must overcome their differences to blah, blah... Still, retreading old ground doesn't stop this all-female spin on the familiar buddy-cop action-comedy being a hoot from start to finish. The Blu-ray disc itself also impresses with its accurate AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode, punchy DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack and an abundance of extras including a quartet of commentaries (including one from the cast of *Mystery Science Theater 3000!*).



WE ASKED...

Do you make use of the Digital Copies supplied with BDs and DVDs?

- Yes, they're very handy
- No, they're a waste of time



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
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'You're like a big Geordie Anne Frank'

Steve Coogan's comic creation is at his insensitive best as he finally goes full size

→ ALAN PARTRIDGE: ALPHA PAPA

When a siege crisis involving a former host-turned-crazed-gunman (Colm Meaney) hits North Norfolk Digital's radio HQ, the hostages' only hope lies in the hands of the peevish and self-obsessed DJ Alan Partridge (Steve Coogan).

From *On the Buses* to *Mr Bean's Holiday*, the history of British cinema is littered with TV sitcoms that tried to make the jump to a full-length feature. Very few have ever found success, but writer Armando Iannucci can now lay claim to two of the very best. Like *In the Loop* before it, *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* manages to stand on its own two feet as a cinematic experience – making it a hilarious (and surprisingly endearing) treat for long-time fans and newcomers alike.

Picture: StudioCanal has done about as good a job as anybody could really expect with its Blu-ray treatment of Alan Partridge's film debut.

The AVC 2.40:1 1080p certainly succeeds in reproducing the clarity of the Red Epic digital cinematography, even if it does occasionally fall prey to some rather washed-out blacks and a lack of shadow detail. However, it's when the action finally moves outside in the film's final act that the encode impresses with more natural contrast levels and a brighter colour palette.

Audio: Once again it's the limitations of the source material, rather than any technical problems, that stop *Alpha Papa* from scoring any better in this area. The main focus of the Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 track (and its down-mixed LPCM 2.0 partner) is the



Alan was always getting roped in to help

HCC VERDICT

Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa

→ StudioCanal

→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A-ha! Alan's feature film debut is probably the most fun you'll have this month

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

dialogue – which sounds absolutely perfect. Beyond that, the use of the surround channels is rather limited, but ambient effects dovetail nicely with the onscreen antics, and there's some surprisingly powerful bass buried away in there as well.

Extras: Best of the extras bunch is *Hectic Danger Days...*, a brilliant and eye-opening half-hour documentary about the making of the film that details how sections of the film were reshoot after Coogan was less than happy with them. This fact helps account for the 27 minutes of deleted and alternate scenes that also appear on the disc. Joining these are a blooper reel and a fascinating chat track from Coogan and co-writers Neil and Rob Gibbons.

For those who want more, choose between the Asda-exclusive 'Premium Partridge Edition' with a bonus disc of interviews and trailers, or an HMV-exclusive that comes with the soundtrack CD and magazine.

Matt spots the hairdresser who told him he'd look good with a shaved head



Damon suits up for class war

Can the *District 9* director escape the dreaded sophomore slump with a second sci-fi flick?



Neill Blomkamp deliberately uses two difference aesthetic styles in the film

→ ELYSIUM

Neill Blomkamp hit it big in 2009 with his debut feature, the apartheid parable *District 9*. Now he's back with yet another dystopian sci-fi satire, but will an extra dose of Hollywood star power allow *Elysium* to trump its well-respected predecessor?

By the year 2154 the very wealthy have finally become fed up with breathing the same air as the rest of humanity and have left the planet to set up home on a luxurious space station called Elysium (shades of Ben Elton's hit 1989 novel *Stark*). Meanwhile, Earth itself has become an overpopulated slum, rife with crime and disease and kept in place by a ruthless robotic police force.

When former car thief Max (Matt Damon) is exposed to a lethal dose of radiation at his factory job, he learns that he only has five days left to live. Knowing that his only hope lies in the miraculous Med-Bays available to the citizens on Elysium, Max visits an old friend in the hope he can smuggle him up there. Yet to win passage to Elysium, Max has to help in a data heist, one that requires him being hard-wired into an exo-suit that boosts his physical strength. Then, when the stolen data turns out to be even more sensitive than expected, Max discovers that his troubles are only just beginning.

You'd be hard pushed to call *Elysium* a subtle film. Indeed, this isn't so much a movie that buries its political message in its subtext, but rather thrusts it into your face while shouting, 'Look at me!'. At times it's almost like a party political broadcast that has been tarted up with spaceships, exo-suits and super-powered scraps. However, if you stomach the preaching then there's fun to be had. Most of the principal cast are on fine form (although Jodie Foster's villainous homeland security chief has the weirdest accent imaginable), the all-important action is first-rate and Blomkamp has once again surrounded himself with gifted artists, creating a spectacular sci-fi future that you can really believe in.

But perhaps next time he could leave the political proselytizing behind. Or at least let somebody else write the script.

Picture: Sporting another of Sony Pictures'

'Mastered in 4K' transfers, *Elysium* certainly looks magnificent on Blu-ray. Right from the start you know you're in for a treat, as you're presented with a hyper-detailed cityscape on Earth before journeying up into the inky depths of space and zooming in on the crisply delineated space station, a sumptuous palette of green lawns and artificial blue skies.

This visual dichotomy is key to the film's aesthetic choices, with scenes set on Earth using a hand-held



District 9 star Sharlto Copley plays *Elysium*'s villain Kruger (right)

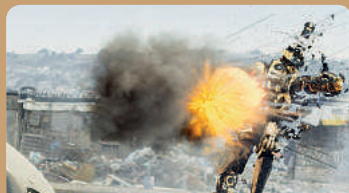
DEMO SCREEN...

Elysium

Time code: 045.04 – 048.49



Hi-tech heist: The plan to steal valuable data from the CEO of Armadyne comes unstuck when it turns out that he's protected by one of his company's ruthless military robots



Blasted to pieces: As Max takes down the robot with an exploding round, the movie goes into slow-motion – allowing you to marvel at the level of fine detail contained within the Blu-ray's AVC encode



Open sesame: As Max's gang finally cuts its way into the Armadyne CEO's downed shuttle, the disc's DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack springs into life with some creative use of the LFE channel



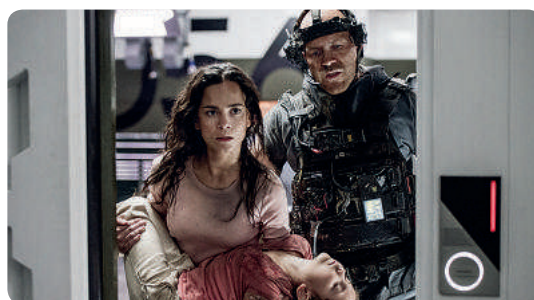
Man vs machine: A second robot bodyguard causes even more trouble, leaving Max no option but to take it on hand-to-hand and delivering yet more audio-visual thrills along the way

documentary style, and those on *Elysium* being more controlled and much smoother.

Sony's AVC 2.40:1 1080p proves equally adept with both styles, capturing the rough-hewn terrain and deep shadows of the former as easily as it does the clean lines and bold contrast of the latter. No matter where Blomkamp's film takes you, it always does so in reference-quality style.

Audio: *Elysium*'s DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundmix doesn't quite match up to the film's A-grade Full HD visuals. While use of the surrounds is well-balanced and deliciously nuanced, the track regularly feels like it's lacking serious low-end heft. Because of this, it never fully engages or pushes your entire speaker array in the way you might expect the soundtrack for a modern Hollywood action blockbuster to do. Subwoofer fanatics may be disappointed.

This is all the more frustrating because (as alluded to above) the rest of *Elysium*'s mix is a cracker. From the ambush in Chapter 7 (see Demo Screen, top) to the armoury shoot-out sequence in Chapter 14, this is a soundtrack that really delivers the goods when it comes to spatial effects and movement around the soundfield. On top of that, both the dialogue and Ryan Amon's music are delivered with care.



Extras: Sony Pictures' disc sports a solid selection of extra features headed up by *Visions of 2154*. Split between *Elysium* and Earth, these Full HD animated galleries showcase the design of the film's locations, vehicles, weapons and technology through concept art, 3D models and visual effects progressions.

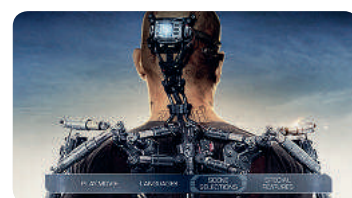
The three-part *Journey to Elysium* documentary (46 minutes) traces the making of the movie from pre-production to photography and post-production. Accompanying this are four additional featurettes looking at the cast (13 minutes); the film's robots, weapons and other technology (10 minutes), visual effects (11 minutes) and the contributions of legendary concept artist Syd Mead (12 minutes). Finally, there's a short extended scene.



Elysium's robots were designed by the talented artists at Weta



The latest plan to spice up F1 pit stops didn't go down well with drivers



HCC VERDICT

Elysium

→ Sony Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A spectacular-looking BD platter for Blomkamp's heavy-handed sci-fi-action blockbuster

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

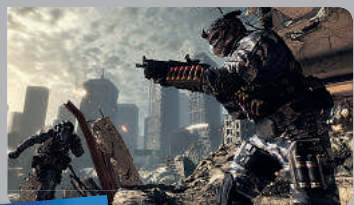
Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your cinema system...

Call of Duty: Ghosts

Activision → Xbox 360/Xbox One/PS3/PS4/Wii U/PC → £50 Approx



Another year, another *Call of Duty*. The difference this year is that not only does...*Ghosts* mark the debut of a new sub-brand for the world's biggest first-person shooter franchise, but it's also our first taste of how the series has adapted to next-gen consoles.



In truth, very little has changed. Set in the near future, the game's single-player campaign sees the US devastated by a hijacked orbital weapon and invaded by the Federation – a group of unified South American states. So, aided by your brother and his dog you join a group of high-tech super soldiers (the titular Ghosts) in the hope of winning back your country.

While this is all a lot of fun, it's a real shame that...*Ghosts* doesn't try anything really different, especially as the opening level plays out as both an interactive version of *Gravity* and a first-person disaster movie, both of which promise more than the game ever delivers. Thankfully, the excellent gameplay mechanics ensure that the multiplayer side of *Call of Duty* is as strong as ever – and the alien-busting 'Extinction' mode is hugely entertaining. Graphically the game is also a smash, particularly on the PS4, where the razor-sharp 1080p graphics are so good it can be a distraction. And, while we'd have liked to see something a little more original, for many gamers this will be more than enough.



LEGO Marvel Super Heroes

Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment → Xbox 360/Xbox One/PS3/PS4/Wii U/PC → £50 Approx



Thanks to the licensing deals controlling their motion picture outings comic book fans are unlikely to see Marvel superheroes Spider-Man, Wolverine and Iron Man joining forces at the multiplex for quite some time. Thankfully, the same restrictions don't exist



when it comes to this latest LEGO game, giving you the chance to play as any of the publisher's best-loved heroes and villains (and plenty of the more obscure ones as well).

The game itself is much the same as it's always been, mixing platforming action with simple puzzles and button-bashing combat. Not what you'd call complicated, but that has always been one of the franchise's virtues – allowing gamers of all ages and abilities to play together in co-op mode. What has changed is the graphical fidelity, with the open-world New York hub and the individual levels looking sharper, more detailed, more colourful and more expansive than ever. Character animation is also faultless, imbuing all of the 100+ heroes and villains with a real sense of individuality. Sonically, the game won't push your surround array to its limits, but what is offered here still sounds pretty snappy, both in-game and through the top-notch voice acting during the (frequently hilarious) cut-scenes. Quite simply Marvel-ous.



Sons of Anarchy: Season Five

20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD
£40 Approx



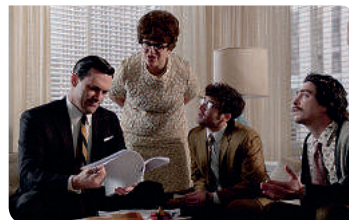
He may have finally wrestled control of the Sons... away from Clay (Ron Perlman), but that doesn't mean things are about to get any easier for Jax (Charlie Hunnan). As a new enemy rises,

Jax faces tough challenges, including one that will cost the life of a close friend... As with the previous seasons, this latest three-disc set rides in with wonderfully detailed AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes and appropriately rowdy DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes. Extras are rather modest, but still pretty interesting.



Mad Men: Season 6

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£40 Approx



Race riots, drugs and women's liberation. The times may be a-changing, but otherwise it's business as usual for the hard-drinking Don Draper (John Hamm) and the rest of his

Madison Avenue co-workers in this superior slice of TV drama. Spread across this latest hi-def set are 13 impeccable AVC 1.78:1 1080p transfers supported by nuanced DTS-HD MA 5.1 tracks. The only disappointment comes from the lacklustre extras – there are no commentaries this time around, just a pair of half-hour behind-the-scenes documentaries



Misfits: Series 5

Channel 4 DVD → All-region BD
£25 Approx



This final batch of adventures for the 'superheroes with ASBOs' finds *Misfits* on much firmer footing than the last. The new characters have all bedded in nicely and the scripts are as

filthy and funny as they were back in the show's best days, helping to gloss over the slightly disappointing main story arc. While we've no complaints about this BD's AVC 1.78:1 1080i imagery, the LPCM stereo audio is sorely limited and the extras are frustratingly sparse.





'You'd tell me if there was one perched on my head as well, wouldn't you?'

Pirates... crew heads way out West

Have Gore Verbinski and Johnny Depp struck gold again with their reinvention of a Western icon?



→ THE LONE RANGER

When his brother is killed by a gang of outlaws, mild-mannered lawyer John Reid (Arnie Hammer) is rescued by a Native American called Tonto (Johnny Depp) and is reborn as a masked avenger. So far, so ordinary – but as you might expect from the producer, director and star of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, this isn't the same Lone Ranger that your parents grew up with.

Of course, director Gore Verbinski and leading man Johnny Depp have previous form in the Western genre with the superb *Rango*. If *The Lone Ranger* doesn't measure up to that animated gem, it's still a much better film than word-of-mouth might lead you to expect. And just like *Rango*, a large part of this comes from the film's playful treatment of the genre and how it's been spiced up with goofy heroes, cartoonish villains and a large dose of unexplained weirdness (what is going on with those killer bunnies?).

It also helps that Verbinski is every bit as adept at directing massive action set-pieces as he is at showcasing Depp's eccentricities – ensuring that the film feels truly broad in scale, something reinforced by the *Hobbit*-esque 150-minute running time.



Picture: Shot primarily on 35mm, Disney's AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p Blu-ray transfer is reference-quality.

The deliberately sun-bleached palette doesn't allow too much in the way of vivid colours, but at the same time the black levels are remarkably true and contrast is astutely judged throughout. Detailing is where the Blu-ray visuals really leave a lasting impression, with every fine texture and intricate detail immaculately rendered and crisply refined. All of Gore Verbinski's massive budget (rumoured at \$215m) is right there on the screen for you to gawp at, unblighted by any technical hiccups.

Audio: *The Lone Ranger* sports a DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix on its home theatre debut, and it's a cracker; a truly bombastic track that clearly relishes throwing effects all around the soundstage during set-pieces like Chapter 6's ambush, and

astonishes with the power and potency of the LFE channel. However, it also excels at delivering more subtle nuances and prioritising dialogue.

Extras: There's not a lot of replay value to be found in the disc's trio of *Making of...* featurettes. *Arnie's Western Road Trip* takes in the locations, *Becoming a Cowboy* looks at the training the cast underwent and *Riding the Rails of The Lone Ranger* focuses on building the film's trains. A deleted scene and bloopers reel are also included.



The Wild West was not the place to go around criticising a man's headgear



HCC VERDICT

The Lone Ranger

→ Walt Disney Home Entertainment

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: This surprisingly fun Western becomes a reference quality home cinema experience on Blu-ray

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Even temples of ancient evil were decked out with neon back in the 1980s...



DISC
OF THE
MONTH



Carpenter nails it yet again

This delightful action-comedy gets the extras-packed hi-def release that it truly deserves

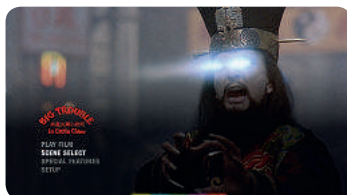
→ **BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA**

When truck driver Jack Burton (Kurt Russell) agrees to help rescue a kidnapped girl from a street gang in San Francisco's Chinatown, he thinks he's simply helping out a friend. But wherever Burton goes trouble is never far behind, and before long he's caught up in a plot involving a trio of supernaturally-powered killers and an ancient Chinese sorcerer with a thing for green-eyed girls.

Having managed to salvage a dwindling reputation in Hollywood with 1984's *Starman*, John Carpenter was offered the chance to helm a \$25million blockbuster for 20th Century Fox. The studio was convinced that the film could be its answer to the Indiana Jones series, yet Carpenter's film only mustered \$11million at the US box office when it hit screens in the summer of 1986.

However, just like *The Thing* before it, *Big Trouble in Little China* found a much more receptive audience waiting for it on video and TV. And while it's not in the same league as Carpenter and Russell's 1982 team-up, it's still terrific fun.

On the one hand, Carpenter gets to combine his love of '70s martial arts flicks with his affection for the rapid-fire dialogue and interplay of Howard Hawks. On the other, Russell was clearly having a blast lampooning the swagger and attitude of John Wayne. Together this adds up to a film with more action, more humour and more imagination than many of its contemporaries.



HCC VERDICT

Big Trouble in Little China

→ Arrow Video → Region B BD

→ £23 Approx

WE SAY: A great hi-def platter for John Carpenter and Kurt Russell's fan-favourite action-comedy

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Picture: Arrow's UK Blu-ray release uses exactly the same hi-def master that 20th Century Fox employed for its 2009 US platter. Not that this is an issue, as it looks absolutely spectacular.

Correctly framed at 2.35:1, the AVC-encoded 1080p image boasts plenty of intricate detailing and wonderfully vibrant colour reproduction (just check out the neon hues of Chapter 10's magic duel). Black tones are impressively strong and the grain structure is free from digital tampering.

Audio: This Blu-ray provides two sonic choices: an LPCM 2.0 stereo track and the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix that appeared on Fox's US release. Both sound very good with the 5.1 effort creating a surprisingly credible and dynamic soundstage, despite some of the limitations of the source elements.

Extras: All of the extras featured on the US disc are present. This includes another excellent chat-track from Carpenter and Russell, the isolated score (DTS-HD MA 5.1), an interview with visual effects producer Robert Edlund, eight deleted scenes, an extended ending, a vintage promo featurette, the hilarious music video, three trailers, six TV spots and a gallery of over 260 behind-the-scenes photos.

To that already impressive lineup Arrow has added brand-new interviews with Carpenter, Russell, cinematographer Dean Cundey, producer Larry Franco and stuntman Jeff Imada. And you also get a 40-page booklet containing a new essay from film critic John Kenneth Muir and a reprint of a 1986 article about the film's production design by Les Paul Robley.

Heaven's Gate

Second Sight → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£20 Approx



Damned by critics and shunned by the public on its original release, Michael Cimino's 1980 western has undergone

a rehabilitation in recent years – a situation that this handsome Blu-ray can only aid. Presented in its 216-minute form, this hi-def platter features an appealing 2.35:1-framed AVC transfer that does an expert job of recreating the film's soft-focus cinematography. Audio comes in both DTS-HD MA 5.1 and LPCM 2.0 mixes, while a bonus DVD offers up enthusiastic interviews with Jeff Bridges and cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, plus a 55-minute documentary.



From Here to Eternity

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£16 Approx



The team at Sony Colorworks (which has previously handled the likes of *Taxi Driver* and *Lawrence of Arabia*)

deliver another beautiful restoration of a Hollywood classic. This magnificent military drama makes its HD debut with a 1080p AVC encode of such pristine quality that you can clearly make out every tiny wrinkle in the cast's costumes. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix remains sympathetic to the original elements, although it's a shame that the actual mono mix is only available in 'lossy' form. Pick of the extras is a superb new picture-in-picture mode packed with interviews and rare photos.



8½

Argent Films → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Federico Fellini's sublime *8½* is the Italian director's most personal film – an account of a director

struggling to complete a film while dealing with pressure from his producers, wife and mistress. A gorgeous mix of the hilarious, the surreal and the profound, it also cuts a fine form on Blu-ray courtesy of Argent Film's attractive AVC 1.85:1 Full HD presentation of Gaumont's restoration and the cleaned up DTS-HD MA mono soundtrack. Extras include interviews, trailers and a transcript of Fellini's 1993 Oscar acceptance speech for his Lifetime Achievement Award.



Tenebrae

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£15 Approx (www.zavvi.com)



Dario Argento's ultra-stylish 1982 horror receives a much appreciated do-over. While the label's

original 2011 release suffered from an issue with digital noise, this new version uses the same master as Wild Side's French release, resulting in a fine AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode. All of the extras from the previous release have been ported across, alongside a new 12-minute interview with Argento expert Maitland McDonagh. While this limited edition steelbook is exclusive to Zavvi, a more widely available standard release is set to follow later this year.



He's the man behind the mask

The legendary Lon Chaney silent horror returns to Blu-ray looking better than ever

→ THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

Between 1912 and 1930, Lon Chaney made countless silent films in almost every conceivable genre. But thanks to his incredible talent for transforming himself through makeup, he is mainly remembered for horror classics such as this electrifying adaptation of Gaston Leroux's novel.

Originally released in 1925, this lavish film was re-edited and reissued in a sound version in 1929. Sadly, that release has been lost, but both the original 1925 edit and a silent version of the 1929 reissue are still here to keep on terrifying audiences.

Picture: This is the second time that Lon Chaney's *Phantom...* has been released on Blu-ray in the UK and it marks a significant step up in quality from the Park Circus 2011 disc.

Utilising a new restoration of the 1929 version of the movie, the BFI's AVC 1.19:1 1080p encode features significantly less print damage and exceptionally rich colour tinting throughout. In addition, the two-strip Technicolor footage of the Masked Ball is window-boxed within the 1.19:1 frame, preserving the full image, rather than zooming in on it to fill the frame, as was done with the Park Circus disc.

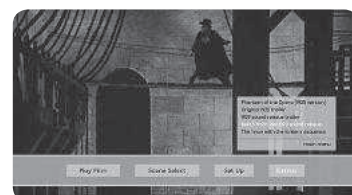
Audio: The Blu-ray contains two versions of Carl Davis's 1996 musical accompaniment – an LPCM 2.0 stereo version and a new DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 remix. Naturally, this being a silent film, neither of the tracks on offer is what you would call demo-worthy, but there's no denying the gorgeous tonality and dynamics of the music in its lossless form.



Extras: While it misses out on the commentary from the Park Circus release, the BFI has still put together an admirable collection of extra features for this dual-play release.

The Blu-ray hosts a bonus 1080p presentation of the 1925 cut of the film (which was only included in SD on the Park Circus release), trailers for the 1925 and 1929 iterations, the only surviving reel of footage from the lost 1929 sound reissue of the film and the mysterious 'man with a lantern' sequence, which is believed to have been shot for use in non-English language releases.

The set also includes two DVD platters. The first replicates the Blu-ray content (albeit with the addition of a Channel 4 Silents restoration souvenir programme in PDF form), the second houses Kevin Brownlow's superb 85-minute documentary *Lon Chaney: A Thousand Faces*. The set also includes a 30-page booklet about the film and the restoration.



HCC VERDICT

The Phantom of the Opera

→ BFI → All-region BD/RO DVD

→ £23 Approx

WE SAY: The BFI has scared up an impressive high-definition package for this vintage horror

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Another HCC production meeting gets under way...



Raise a glass to the apocalypse

Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's new sci-fi comedy finds hilarity in booze and body snatching



→ THE WORLD'S END

An epic pub crawl becomes a battle against body-stealing aliens in this third and final part of Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's unofficial 'Three Colours Cornetto' trilogy.

Like *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* before it, *The World's End* packs in plenty of gags and film homages (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *They Live* loom large throughout) as it plays around with genre conventions. It also shows a newfound maturity in storytelling, finding a dark emotional core in the arrested adolescence of Pegg's leading man and the middle-age angst of his cohorts. Meanwhile, Wright continues to cement his place as one of the most inventive and skillful action directors around – we can't wait to see what he does when he gets the chance to play around in the Marvel universe with 2015's *Ant-Man*.

Picture: *The World's End* makes its Blu-ray debut with an authentically film-like image. While this means that it doesn't always look as sharp as some of Hollywood's glossier all-digital efforts, the disc's visuals are still exceedingly well resolved and there's plenty of fine detail on show in medium shots and close-ups.

Black levels also impress, despite a smattering of noise in a couple of sequences. And although colours aren't particularly pronounced, there are occasional flashes of vibrancy that come from the blue blood of the 'blanks' and the orange tones that dominate the film's explosive climax.

Audio: Thanks to the sci-fi trappings that come to dominate the film's second half, this DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix offers more of a multichannel punch than the usual comedy soundtrack. There's plenty of heft to the mix's low-end and it's frequently deployed to dramatic effect. Your surround speakers will also get quite a workout as well, thanks to a healthy does of panning and spot effects that make for an enjoyably three-dimensional audio experience.

Extras: Kicking things off are three commentaries. The first teams Pegg and Wright, the second Wright and director of photography Bill Pope, and the third finds Pegg joining Nick Frost and Paddy Considine. If none of those take your fancy, you can always opt to watch the film with picture-in-picture storyboards or a subtitle trivia track.

Then there's a 48-minute *Making of...*, a 28-minute documentary about stunts and FX, five production featurettes, animatics, hair and makeup tests, rehearsal footage, stunt tapes and a VFX breakdown.

On top of that there's also a deleted scene, outtakes, alternate edits, a music video, four trailers, four TV spots, five photo galleries, a compilation of alternate 'TV Safe' footage and a *Signs & Omens* featurette. This last is one of our favourites, as it reveals the various hidden gags and Easter Eggs littered throughout the movie.



HCC VERDICT

The World's End

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Impressive AV credentials and a surfeit of extras make Wright and Pegg's latest BD a must for fans

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Fewer bangs for your Blu-ray bucks

Wahlberg and Washington's action-comedy is surprisingly lacking in firepower

→ 2 GUNS

With its mismatched lead characters, dashes of violence and quick-fire comic dialogue, *2 Guns* is a clear throwback to the likes of *Lethal Weapon* and *48Hrs*. Yet it's not quite as accomplished as either of those two genre powerhouses.

Denzel Washington and Mark Wahlberg are DEA agent Bobby Beans and Naval Intelligence Officer Stig Stigman, forced to work together to recover a stash of mob money that's also being sought by a murderous CIA kingpin (Bill Paxton). The twist is that, in the beginning, both Beans and Stigman thinks the other is a common criminal...

As an action-comedy, *2 Guns* suffers from not enough action and not enough laughs. And as a buddy movie, Washington and Wahlberg just don't spend enough time on screen together. When they do and the bullets are flying, *2 Guns* is a real treat, but the tricky plot drags them apart too often. Definitely worth watching, but you might be expecting more.

Picture: EntertainmentOne's AVC-encoded 2.40:1 Full HD transfer is not the most natural-looking image – contrast levels are pushed high – but there's plenty of detailing to be found amongst the ink-black shadows and bright sunshine. Colours, including rich reds, seem spot on, and film grain, apart from in a couple of wide shots of the Mexican sky, never becomes a problem. On the other hand, there's no sickening DNR to worry about either.

Audio: The highlight of *2 Guns*' DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundmix is an outrageous action sequence involving a helicopter, explosions, machine-gunfire and a herd of stampeding bulls(!). Here, the sound engineers

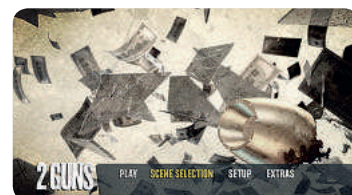


Denzel distracts Mark by blowing money out of his backside

orchestrate a brilliantly immersive sonic maelstrom, with the chopper roaming around the soundstage and bullets cracking into cars with bass-heavy punch or high-frequency pings as required.

It's a dynamic five-minute set-piece that will get the best from your system – and it's therefore slightly unfortunate that the rest of the soundtrack isn't as adventurous. While dialogue is, for the most part, perfectly legible, and Foley effects ever-so distinct, the score is instantly forgettable and the rear channels occasionally fall completely silent.

Extras: Fittingly, there are two extras on the *2 Guns* BD. *Click Click, Bang Bang* is a six-minute *Making of...* feature that offers only a vague insight into the movie's production. You're much better off selecting the two-hander chat track with producer Adam Siegel and director Baltasar Kormákur, which is packed with all sorts of info, from the on-set 'no cowboy hat' rule to the tricks of filming with cattle.



HCC VERDICT

2 Guns

→ EntertainmentOne
→ Region B BD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: A reasonably entertaining flick on an impressive Blu-ray – but nothing more than that

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

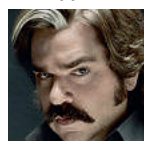
Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Toast of London

Channel 4 DVD → R2 DVD
£20 Approx

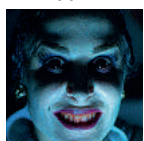


The *IT Crowd*'s Matt Berry finally gets a show of his own with this six-episode sitcom about the travails of middle-aged actor Stephen Toast. With its mix of surreal sight gags and daft puns the show is definitely an acquired taste, but as far as we're concerned these six slices of *Toast*... satisfied our hunger for big laughs. On top of its good-looking anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers and effective Dolby Digital 2.0 soundtracks, this DVD release will also win fans over with an impressive array of extras – which include the original 2012 pilot and chat tracks for that and two other episodes.



Insidious: Chapter 2

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£20 Approx

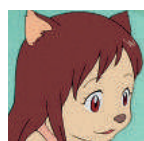


Cheap scares mix with convoluted plotting in this follow-up to the 2011 horror hit as writer Leigh Whannell and director James Wan reveal the spooky secret behind the Lambert family's link to the supernatural. Unsurprisingly, all of the ghostly activity makes for an enjoyable DTS-HD MA 5.1 track that likes nothing better than sneaking up behind you and making you jump with a sudden noise in the surrounds. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode also satisfies with jet blacks that threaten to unleash all manner of spectral horrors. Extras include an on-set Q&A, four featurettes and three webisodes.



Wolf Children: 3-Disc Collector's Edition

Manga Entertainment → Region B BD
/R2 DVD → £35 Approx

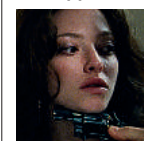


Director Mamoru (*The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*) Hosoda cements his place as the heir to Miyazaki's crown with this beautiful, fairytale-esque drama about a single mother bringing up two children who can turn into wolves. The film's lush painted backdrops and deceptively simple character art are done full justice by the rich AVC 1.78:1 1080p visuals, while the Dolby TrueHD 5.1 mix delivers a good blend of crystal-clear dialogue and surround activity. Extras consist of a chat-track from the US voice cast and various Japanese promo videos.



Lovelace

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25 Approx



There's a slightly queasy feeling of trying to have your cake and eat it about this biopic of *Deep Throat* star Linda Lovelace. While the first half offers a *Boogie Nights*-style approach to her rise to stardom, the second half then revisits the same material in order to show the much darker truth about her husband/manager Chuck Trainor. Still, Amanda Seyfried is superb in the lead role and the decision to shoot on Super16 stock gives it a veneer of '70s authenticity (even if it does result in an extremely grainy AVC 1.85:1 1080p Blu-ray encode). The disc's sole extra is an all-too-short *Making of...* featurette.





Rehabilitated villain comes good

The pick of 2013's animated blockbusters sets out to stun with its hi-def visuals

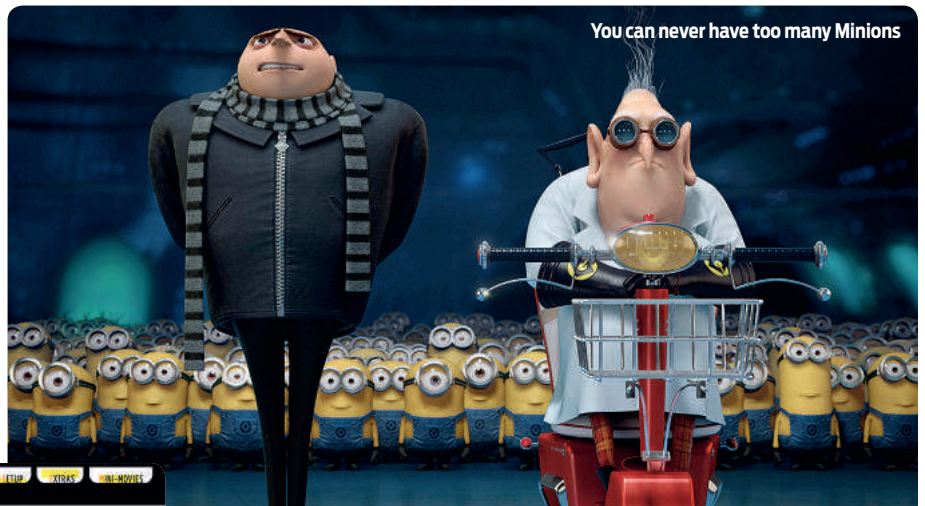
→ DESPICABLE ME 2 3D

This quick-witted and zany sequel to 2010's surprise animated smash finds former supervillain Gru having renounced a life of crime in favour of raising his three adopted daughters and using his gadgets to make jam. But when the Anti-Villain League asks for help tracking down a mystery criminal, Gru finds himself back in the game and up to his neck in something more terrifying than he ever expected: romance. Terrific cartoon fun – even if it's not quite as good as the side-splitting original.

Picture: Universal has done a superb job bringing *Despicable Me 2* to Blu-ray in both its 3D and 2D incarnations. As sequences such as Chapter 3's underwater journey show, this is a film that was made to be seen in 3D and the stereoscopic Blu-ray platter's MVC 1.85:1 1080p images handles everything thrown at it with aplomb – even the potentially troublesome shots showcasing negative parallax (in front of the screen) trickery.

The set's 2D platter proves equally proficient, courtesy of a bright and colourful AVC 1.85:1 1080p transfer. And while some instances of banding hold both encodes back from absolute perfection, we doubt your junior AV addicts will notice.

Audio: There's nothing technically wrong with *Despicable Me 2*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, but its use of the surround speakers is so restrained that at one point we even checked to make sure that none of the cables were loose in our system (they weren't).



You can never have too many Minions

As the film progresses the mix eventually unleashes a handful of set-pieces that do bring the entire soundstage to life. Yet taken as a whole, it's lacking in the kind of consistent playfulness and immersive quality that marks out the very best lossless soundtracks.

Extras: The 2D disc's bonus features get underway with a trio of fun animated shorts – *Puppy*, *Panic in the Mailroom* and *Training Wheels* – and a six-minute featurette about their creation. Also included on the set's 2D platter are an audio commentary from directors Chris Renaud and Pierre Coffin, an extended version of Gru's flashback scene and six brief character and gadget featurettes. The 3D disc includes a stereoscopic version of the *Puppy* short.

HCC VERDICT

Despicable Me 2 3D

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: This gag-packed cartoon sequel looks superb in HD – although we expected more from the audio

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Doctor Who: The Day of the Doctor 3D

BBC Worldwide → All-region BD
£20 Approx



While this special celebratory episode of the BBC's hit sci-fi series is a resounding success, the same thing cannot be said of this Blu-ray. Our biggest complaint is that both the 2D and 3D versions have been converted from 1080i50 to 1080p24 for this release. While this was mandatory for the 3D version, the 2D incarnation should have been left as it was shot, due to the slowdown issues that result from the conversion process. Additionally, while the BD offers up a fair batch of extras (including *The Last Day* and *The Night of the Doctor* mini-sodes) it's not quite as comprehensive as fans might have hoped.



An Adventure in Space and Time

BBC Worldwide → R2 DVD
£20 Approx



Mark Gatiss' drama about the creation of *Doctor Who* is a poignant and charming companion to the show's 50th anniversary episode. While the anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer on this DVD holds up rather well, it's a shame that there's no Blu-ray on the cards as a production this handsome is crying out to be seen in hi-def. Among the extras you'll find a touching tribute to William Hartnell, an 11-minute *Making of...* featurette, two deleted scenes and four reconstruction clips (including a fun cameo from Gatiss).



Planes

Walt Disney Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £20 Approx



'Bland' and 'cynical' aren't words we ever expected to find ourselves using when reviewing a Pixar film.

But then we never imagined that the studio would release anything as crass and merchandise-motivated as this *Cars* spin-off. Still, this Blu-ray release is an absolute knock-out thanks to its dazzling AVC 1.78:1 1080p transfer and precision-engineered DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix. Best of all though is the inclusion of the award-winning Mickey Mouse short *Croissant de triomphe* in addition to all of the extras from the US release (which is a turn up for the books).



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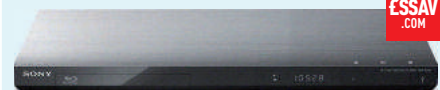


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Yamaha RX-V375
+ Q Acoustics 2000i (5.1)

~~£898~~ **£665**



Yamaha RX-V675
+ Q Acoustics 2000i (5.1)

~~£1148~~ **£829**



Yamaha RX-V675
+ Q Acoustics 7000i (5.1)

~~£1398~~ **£1035**



Yamaha RX-V675
+ Focal Dome (5.1)

~~£1999~~ **£1099**



Yamaha RX-V675
+ DALI ZENSOR 5 (5.1)

~~£1928~~ **£1399**



Yamaha RX-A1030
+ Focal Dome (5.1)

~~£2499~~ **£1499**



Yamaha RX-A3030
+ Focal Dome (5.1)

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BLU-RAY PLAYERS Which deck rules the roost? **PROJECTORS** It's time to blow up your video!
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guide is here
to help



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Samsung UE55F9000** → £3,300

★★★★★

After debuting with a £35,000 85in beast, Samsung enters the sensible Ultra HD TV arena with an absolute star. This neat-looking 55incher offers superb upscaling of regular HD sources and immersive active 3D. *HCC #226*

**Sony KDL-40W905A** → £1,400 ★★★★★

Flaunting the brand's new Triluminos edge LED lighting, this set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. Pricey, but worth it. *HCC #222*

**Panasonic TX-P60ZT65** → £3,800 ★★★★★

This plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want 4K... *HCC #223*

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows. *HCC #221*

**Samsung UE46F8000** → £1,800 ★★★★★

The F8000 tops Samsung's LED lineup (if you exclude the £35,000 S9 Ultra HD set) and is a consistently good performer. Bright, vivid images married to a super-stylish design. *HCC #221*

**Sony KDL-65X9005A** → £5,000 ★★★★★

The first 'affordable' Ultra HD screen we've tested, Sony's 65in next-gen panel is a cracker, offering pin-sharp visuals and brilliant Passive 3D. Blacks aren't best-in-breed, though. *HCC #224*

**Panasonic TX-L65WT600** → £5,400 ★★★★★

With its HDMI 2.0 and DisplayPort hookup, this is the 4K option for those who want the current state-of-the-art. Other 65in rivals are available for less, however. *HCC #228*

**Panasonic TX-P42GT60** → £1,150 ★★★★★

This mid-range plasma still carries much of the technology found on Panasonic's higher-end PDPs, and delivers finessed, film-friendly Full HD visuals. Not very stylish, though. *HCC #226*

**Philips 55PFL8008** → £2,500 ★★★★★

Philips' current flagship, this 55in sports a premium design and provides electrifying HD images. The Smart portal could be improved, however, and setup is fiddly. *HCC #224*

**LG 50PA650T** → £500 ★★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for £500 is hard to ignore, and this LG rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart tech here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling. *HCC #219*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 90ins are also hitting the high street – and 85in 4K panels are also on offer. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and more energy consumption. There's also a limited choice – only Samsung, LG and Panasonic are selling plasma TVs in the UK, and the latter will soon stop.



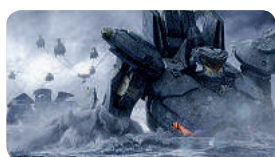
Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set currently on sale.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**Fast & Furious 6: Extended Action Packed Edition**

This is pure escapism on a cracking BD disc – the car acrobatics and rapid-fire fist-fights are delivered with pin-sharp 2.40:1 visuals and a precision-steered soundmix.

★★★★★

**Pacific Rim 3D**

While the lack of a 7.1 mix is disappointing, Guillermo del Toro's monster mash still delivers demo-worthy hi-def visuals in both its 2D and 3D incarnations. It also comes loaded with fantastic extras.

★★★★★

**Man of Steel 3D**

Looking for a lossless soundtrack that is guaranteed to push your audio setup to its absolute limits? Then do yourself (and your home cinema) a favour and pick up Superman's latest cinematic outing.

★★★★★

**The Wicker Man: The Final Cut**

Boasting three different edits of the movie (including a stunning restoration of a new 'Final Cut') and oodles of extras, this is the definitive hi-def edition of Robin Hardy's cult British shocker.

★★★★★

**Iron Man 3**

This third outing for Robert Downey Jr's superhero reignites the franchise, with director Shane Black injecting some wry humour into the mayhem. Walt Disney's Blu-ray doesn't disappoint in AV terms either.

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★**
 Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. A new model, the £600 BDP-103D, adds Darbee Visual Presence processing for you to play with. *HCC #215/#228*
- 2**  **Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★**
 This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. *HCC #210*
- 3**  **Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. *HCC #217*
- 4**  **Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs. *HCC #220*
- 5**  **Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★**
 An affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer. *HCC #219*
- 6**  **Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★**
 As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. *HCC #217*
- 7**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★**
 Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though. *HCC #208*
- 8**  **Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★**
 Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though. *HCC #222*
- 9**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★**
 New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features. *HCC #221*
- 10**  **Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★★**
 The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart hub is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. *HCC #227*

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation?: Sony's console still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joy pad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The new PS4 currently doesn't offer 3D BD (or CD) playback.



DEMO DELIGHT

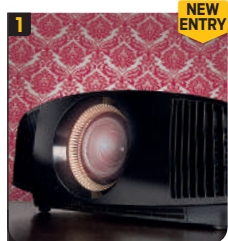
Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

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TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changedNEW
ENTRY**Sony VPL-VW500ES** → £8,800

★★★★★

Sony's second-gen 4K projector is around half the price of the VPL-VW1000ES (below) and comes with HDMI 2.0 chippery and Triluminos colour wizardry. Auditioning this classy PJ is a no-brainer. *HCC #228*

**JVC X55** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more flexible, second iteration of JVC's e-shift pixel-polishing wizardry, the X55 offers supreme clarity as well as impressive contrast and near-faultless 3D presentation. *HCC #219*

**JVC X35** → £2,900 ★★★★★

The £3,000 price point is a hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings. *HCC #218*

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so! *HCC #209*

**SIM2 Super Lumis** → £37,000 ★★★★★

With a more potent lamp than its Lumis forebear, this new light-cannon from SIM2 costs an arm and leg, and is only Full HD, but delivers an astonishing level of performance. *HCC #227*

**JVC X75** → £6,500 ★★★★★

This offers an increased contrast over its DLA-X55 stablemate plus greater calibration options. It's a better performer, too, but whether it's worth the extra outlay is your decision. *HCC #225*

**Epson EH-TW8100** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W? Then save yourself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead. *HCC #218*

**Panasonic PT-AT6000E** → £2,900 ★★★★★

Panasonic's PJ is a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't get any 3D spex bundled in the box... *HCC #215*

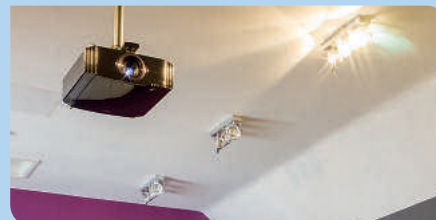
**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. A bit noisy. *HCC #220*

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though. *HCC #220*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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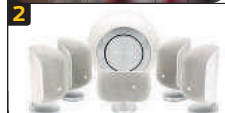
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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**KEF R Series 7.1** → £6,500

A 7.1 array mixing both dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*

**Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D** → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. *HCC #212*

**Q Acoustics Q2000i** → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub. *HCC #211*

**Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP** → £950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. *HCC #224*

**M&K Sound S150 MkII** → £7,150 ★★★★★

A no-nonsense 5.1 package with Hollywood heritage and THX Ultra2 certification, this is all about uncoloured, deeply detailed audio rather than flashy aesthetics. *HCC #225*

**DALI Epicon 5.1** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic. *HCC #222*

**Tannoy Precision Series 5.1** → £4,450 ★★★★★

These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. *HCC #226*

**Monitor Audio MASS 5.1** → £800 ★★★★★

Five satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms. *HCC #217*

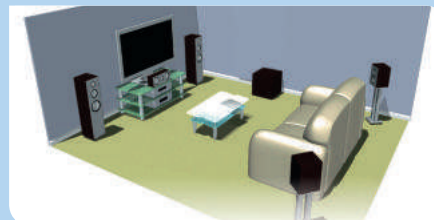
**KEF E305 5.1** → £900 ★★★★★

The living room-friendly looks of KEF's newest set of 'eggs' will ensure they get a lot of fans, and sound quality, courtesy of the brand's Uni-Q driver array, is superb. *HCC #222*

**Cambridge Audio Aero 5.1** → £1,350 ★★★★★

BMR drivers help to create a wide yet cohesive soundstage, and the balance between potent bass and clear high frequencies suits all material. Bit old-fashioned style-wise, though. *HCC #228*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Gladiator: While it's often the low-end oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters



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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony STR-DA5800ES** → £2,200

★★★★★

Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, a unique video-on-demand platform), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of great post-processing modes. *HCC #223*

**Denon AVR-4520** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Denon's flagship AVR sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. *HCC #218*

**Arcam AVR750** → £4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*

**Krell Foundation** → £6,500 ★★★★★

One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. *HCC #224*

**Yamaha CX-A5000** → £2,500 ★★★★★

Part of Yamaha's new high-end separates line (you can match it with the MX-A5000 amp), this 11-channel processor sounds clean, precise and offers a dizzying range of features. *HCC #228*

**Marantz AV8801** → £2,500 ★★★★★

The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance. *HCC #220*

**Onkyo TX-NR626** → £400 ★★★★★

Packing both Bluetooth and Wi-Fi (without the need for optional dongles) means this affordable Onkyo is ideal for network audio. Multichannel delivery is energetic, if a little brash. *HCC #226*

**Denon AVR-X4000** → £1,200 ★★★★★

A revamped GUI makes the AVR-X4000 pretty on the eye, but it's still not a fool-proof user experience. Sonically it's assured and the media streaming side is hard to fault. *HCC #226*

**Harman Kardon AVR 370** → £800 ★★★★★

One of the most sultry-looking models on the market, HK's mid-ranger offers 8-in, 2-out HDMI hookup, AirPlay and a classy audio performance. The app and UI could be better. *HCC #219*

**Yamaha RX-V675** → £500 ★★★★★

The new low/mid-range RX-V675 digs out all the sonic details of your Blu-ray platters and places them across the soundstage. A great-sounding AVR at a good price. Primitive UI. *HCC #225*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 

Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers. HCC #197
- 

JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214
- 

Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. HCC #208
- 

Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast. HCC #201
- 

REL Acoustics T-7 → £650 ★★★★★
The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. HCC #223
- 

Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's revamped PVI uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212
- 

Velodyne DD18+ → £5,800 ★★★★★
If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification. HCC #197
- 

REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★
A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth. HCC #208
- 

SVS SB12-NSD → £650 ★★★★★
A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. HCC #223
- 

Quadral Qube 10 → £525 ★★★★★
A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance. HCC #223

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Oblivion: Joseph Kosinski's sophomore sci-fiction flick looks spectacular on Blu-ray, and its visual panache is matched by a 7.1 audio mix that particularly impresses with its low-end extension. The subwoofer channel here is regularly employed, dropping deep and loud to accompany everything from explosions and weapons fire to the roaring engines of Tom Cruise's recon ship. Love your lows? Then love this.

Top 5 HD GAMES



Injustice: Gods Among Us
A beat 'em up incorporating a bevy of DC Comics characters (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman *et al*) sounds like a great idea – and it is. Accessible to novices and suprisingly fun in the single-player mode. Pow!
★★★★★



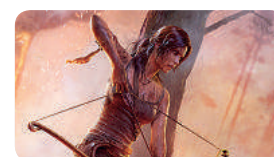
Grid 2
Codemasters' sequel is the king of arcade racers, with the souped-up cars handling like a dream and the opposition's AI ensuring victories are well-earned. Photo-realistic vehicles and environments dazzle.
★★★★★



Grand Theft Auto V
Rockstar's newest slice of car-jacking, gun-wielding fun is absolutely massive in both scale and ambition – a big-budget game that will leave a big grin on your face. Graphically gorgeous, and the 5.1 mix isn't bad, either.
★★★★★



Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
This sequel takes to the high seas for piratical fun, with an enormous open world, absorbing gameplay, beautiful graphics and a soundtrack packed with well-realised ambient effects.
★★★★★



Tomb Raider
Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.
★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Now TV box → £10 ★★★★★**
 An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. *HCC #226*
- 2 Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★**
 Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, this starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. *HCC #222*
- 3 Arcam iRDAC → £400 ★★★★★**
 Arcam replaces the earlier rDAC with a model that boasts more inputs (now 192kHz capable) and completely revised innards. An excellent performer great for computer music. *HCC #228*
- 4 PSB M4U1 → £220 ★★★★★**
 These closed-back 'phones are excellent all-rounders – agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too. *HCC #221*
- 5 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 6 One For All Simple 4 → £22 ★★★★★**
 A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control, One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys. *HCC #220*
- 7 Bang & Olufsen Beolit 12 → £600 ★★★★★**
 Pricy for an AirPlay speaker, but the performance and rugged build of B&O's semi-portable Beolit 12 justify the outlay; the onboard 120W amp delivers the goods. *HCC #224*
- 8 DVDO Air → £350 ★★★★★**
 Built around the WiDi standard, this wireless HD sender handles Full HD (including 3D) video and multichannel audio. Build quality and design is good, performance hard to fault. *HCC #214*
- 9 Sony PlayStation 4 → £350 ★★★★★**
 The PS4 offers a killer gaming experience, with the under-the-hood power resulting in great-looking games. Yet it has a few foibles. Wanna play 3D BDs? You'll be disappointed. *HCC #229*
- 10 Corsair Voyager Air → £180 ★★★★★**
 A Wi-Fi-enabled portable hard drive (1TB), also with Ethernet, the smart-looking Voyager Air is an ideal partner for 'phone/tablet users. No DLNA media server on board, though. *HCC #223*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



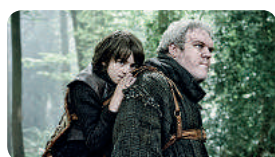
What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season**

Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.

★★★★★

**The Walking Dead: The Complete Third Season**

The best series of zombie TV yet, this third run shuffles onto Blu-ray with authentic 1.78:1 HD imagery and atmospheric and spine-tingling DTS-HD MA sonics. Roll on S4.

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**James Dean: Ultimate Collector's Edition**

Warner Home Video has given *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant* 4K restorations from their original camera negatives. The result is that these 1950s classics look fab.

★★★★★

**Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series**

Audio commentaries, short episode prequels and featurettes are among the extras on this set collecting 15 episodes of TARDIS-based fun. The 1080i transfers impress, too.

★★★★★

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TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★

**Sky+HD, £subscription**

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250**

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★

**Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350**

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★

**Samsung BD-F8500, £300**

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options – it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the EPG environment

★★★★★

TOP 5 SOUNDBARS

**Yamaha YSP-3300, £900**

A slender soundbar/sub duo that offers a very effective virtual surround performance courtesy of Yamaha's Beam driver tech. Connections include four HDMI inputs – but there's no Bluetooth here

★★★★★

**Sonos PlayBar, £600**

Sonos' debut 'bar offers a hefty, spacious sound (although it doesn't come with a sub) and it can be easily added to an existing Sonos network for music-on-demand fun. Only connects to your TV via optical

★★★★★

**Orbitsound M12, £400**

With its wireless subwoofer connectivity and Bluetooth support, this soundbar provides a streamlined user experience, and in audio terms it delivers rich, voluminous sonics with a wide stereo spread

★★★★★

**Philips HTL9100, £600**

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound

★★★★★

**Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650**

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS

**Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630**

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★

**Samsung HT-F9750W, £1,500**

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome sound; packed with features

★★★★★

**Harman Kardon BDS470, £650**

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★

**LG BH8220B, £650**

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★

**Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350**

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson believes the complexity of modern AV hardware is holding our hobby back from regaining its mass-market appeal – and that needs to change

LOTS OF PEOPLE watch movies at home on large screens, but how many go to the lengths of adding an AV amplifier, a full-size loudspeaker package and a subwoofer or two? Very few, because despite TV sound quality going backwards for over a decade, proper home cinema audio is just not on most people's radar.

Sitting in a contemplative fug, fuelled by leftover Christmas pudding and a half-pint of ruby port, I had an epiphany. I realised the single biggest reason for the niche-dom of home cinema, that one defining factor that has been turning off potential AV enthusiasts in their droves. The reason that I get stupendously frustrated before watching a movie. The reason very few people expand beyond 5.1-channel surround sound. The reason soundbars outsell traditional AV systems at a rate of around 50 to 1. And the very same reason that *HCC* readers are die-hard techies: home cinema is just too damn complicated.

I'm sure there will have been times when you have sat down with a Blu-ray and had picture and no sound, or visa versa. You dig into the menus for some clues, swap cables around, scroll through decode modes, unplug and reconnect HDMI leads and aimlessly press buttons on the remote control hoping for an answer. I usually get to a point of abject confusion, chucking my home cinema separates out of my window, before realising that one single little check box wasn't ticked in a dark recess of the onscreen GUI. Grrrrrr.

Speaking Pacifically

Last week I parked myself on the sofa to take in *Pacific Rim*. First off I got no picture at all; I then realised I had set the HDMI output from my processor to the monitor not the projector. Then

I experienced no sound. I switched functions on and off, scrolled through processing modes, popped up the OSD and changed everything from the speaker delays to the image on the home page. I even powered everything off and back on again, in the hope that the traditional PC fix would work. No. All I got was a message on the display that made no sense at all. Seriously: email me if you know what 'Dial offset +4' means.

I am not alone either. I had a telephone conversation last month with *HCC*'s Ed, trying to jointly get his AV receiver to do what was required. Like all of these frustrations it was, of course, user error. The solution was plainly obvious – but only when you made the tenuous link between snippets of information on pages 34, 48, 109 and 115 of the manual.

All this occurs at a time when making technology simple has been the catalyst of success for the whole tablet phenomenon. A tap here, a swipe there, and all manner of things are possible with today's modern gadgets. On the other hand, your average AV addict is likely to spend his Saturday evenings on his knees with arms raised in the air like the poster art of *Platoon*, shouting 'Why? Why won't you work! Why?'

So, dear manufacturers of AV equipment, it is time for change. From 2014 onwards, perhaps we could ditch the 'Who can add the most features/ have the biggest menu options' philosophy, and concentrate on simplifying great AV performance. In that way home cinema might regain its mass-market appeal and I won't have to buy new double-glazing. Again ■

Have you had hardware problems that have driven you mad? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Richard Stevenson's back garden is littered with the carcasses of home cinema gear tossed out of his window, and empty port bottles



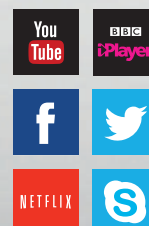
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